EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIALOGUE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

BY

COURTNEY LEIGH ORZEL

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Carolyn Shields, Chair
Professor Nicholas Burbules
Professor Marilyn Johnston-Parsons
Clinical Assistant Professor Linda Sloat
Abstract

High standards and expectations for all students drive current school reform efforts which target accountability measures and focus on standardized tests, leaving many American students, particularly those who have been traditionally underserved and marginalized, feeling excluded and silenced in school. Thus, it is important for school leaders to look to dialogic relations and democratic practices as a means for educational inclusion. Using a reputational approach guided by a theoretical framework focused on dialogue as ontological, this multiple case study examined the journey from exclusive, hierarchical structures to inclusive, democratic schools. In particular, the study examined the relationship between dialogue and inclusive leadership practices from three principals’ perspectives, including their conception of an inclusive school, obstacles encountered, and strategies used to create democratic, socially just learning communities. Findings suggest that a relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools existed in schools where the principal viewed dialogue in an ontological sense and as a way of life. Recommendations include suggestions for school leaders to intentionally create space for necessary dialogue to occur in their schools. Further research is suggested to examine the relationship between dialogue and student achievement and the impact of deficit thinking on dialogue in schools.
To Nolan and to all of the students who deserve to have a voice in our schools
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Chapter 1
Dialogue and Inclusive Schools

Ahmad: “Mrs. Orzel, what do you do when people are racist?”

Mrs. Orzel: “Why? Has someone been racist to you?”

Ahmad: “You know I’m Arabic, right?”

Mrs. Orzel: “Yes. Why?”

Ahmad: “People are calling me terrorist and suicide bomber.”

Mrs. Orzel: “Who?”

Ahmad: “I can’t say who. It happens all of the time—all day, every day.”

Background and Problem

Historically and recently, education is a debated topic. In fact, many argue that education is in crisis (Bode, 2001; Barber, 2001; Giroux, 2002; Lewis & Macedo, 1996) and reform is needed. Reform efforts, like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) claim to advocate for all students; however, the achievement gap still exists, and many students are excluded from programs and curricula as a result of such reform efforts. Many more, like Ahmad, are excluded because their backgrounds, including their home language, religion, or ethnicity, are dissimilar from those of the predominantly White middle class children still seen as today’s typical students.

Federal reform efforts are designed to measure accountability. Thus, academic gains and progress are measured by a single, standardized test, leaving school leaders to face a daunting and overwhelming challenge to meet federal and state mandates, while providing a democratic, socially just, inclusive learning environment. As an example, schools are expected to meet
Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) targets under NCLB guidelines, and 100% of students are expected to be ‘proficient’ by the year 2014. Under this model, many schools end up labeled as “failing schools” even though they have made academic progress. However, President Obama recently proposed to waive the cornerstone requirements of the NCLB Act, which would give states the freedom to create their own student achievement goals, identify the lowest 15% of schools in the state, and would allow states to design their own student interventions. The waiver would require schools to adopt college and career readiness standards and create guidelines for teacher evaluations (Klein, 2011).

Even with the possibility of a waiver, principals face a great deal of responsibility for ensuring that students are learning and not failing; therefore, school leaders tend to take control over situations and perpetuate the routines and hierarchy in schools which ultimately diminishes their participation in and creation of democratic, inclusive practices like dialogue and collaborative, shared decision-making processes (Ryan, 2006). Ravitch (2010) explains why the term “failing schools” should be eliminated. She states:

We should stop using the term "failing schools" to describe schools where test scores are low. . . . Among its students may be many who do not speak or read English, who live in poverty, who miss school frequently because they must baby-sit while their parents look for work, or who have disabilities that interfere with their learning. These are not excuses for their low scores but facts about their lives. (p. 1)

Here, Ravitch stresses the importance of diversity in schools by highlighting the point that students come from various backgrounds and bring different perspectives to school. Educators must understand the disparities in educational achievement related to students’ abilities, home lives, and personal experiences.
Many scholars argue that educational disparities are prevalent in today’s educational system. Social, cultural, economic, and political disparities are evidenced in the nation’s achievement data. Shields (2009) speaks to such disparities and suggests:

There are systemic barriers in terms of both structures and attitudes—fiscal resource allocation, school facilities, teacher training—as well as discrimination that prevent all students from achieving at similar levels or from having similar opportunities for life choices and chances beyond school. These disparities can no longer be ignored. (p. 20)

School leaders must understand such disparities in order to address individual students’ needs. The next section will address exclusionary practices in school and challenges associated with inclusive leadership.

**Exclusionary Practices in Schools and Leadership Challenges**

*Mrs. Orzel: Ahmad, how does it make you feel when students call you terrorist and suicide bomber?*

*Ahmad: I feel horrible. I just feel like I don’t belong here.*

Exclusionary practices in education marginalize and impact all students, but especially those from minoritized backgrounds, like Ahmad. School programs and curriculum exclude and marginalize students because of external, uncontrollable factors such as gender, ethnicity, and poverty. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are repeatedly excluded, denied educational opportunities, and silenced in the school setting (Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2009).

School leaders face significant challenges to address academic, social, and emotional needs of all students. As an example, the initial dialogue in the beginning of this chapter shows one example of a school leader’s challenge to address exclusionary practices in school. In many cases, school leaders perpetuate exclusive practices by falling victim to federal mandates, and ultimately limiting dialogue in schools. In turn, crucial dialogue, like the example at the
beginning of this chapter, does not occur unless spaces for dialogue exist. Hence, school leaders face an overwhelming, yet necessary, challenge to create inclusive communities which promote—and expect—spaces for necessary dialogue to occur.

One way some scholars advocate to address challenges associated with limited dialogue in schools is through the implementation of an “inclusive school community.” An inclusive school community is one in which “people come together, acknowledging the intrinsic worth of each member of the community, in playful, creative, and empowering interactions” (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 7). Using dialogue as the foundation of community, an inclusive school community is one which is deeply democratic, equitable, and one that treats individuals with “absolute regard” (Starratt, 1991). Therefore, inclusive communities promote dialogue and equitable opportunities for all students, especially those who have been traditionally underserved and marginalized.

**Exclusion From School Programs**

*Mrs. Orzel: Teachers—Are you aware that our Arabic students are being called terrorist and suicide bomber?*

*Teacher: No, I am not. I have never heard that before and I have worked here for years. Is it everyone or is it just one kid?*

*Mrs. Orzel: Does it matter if it is just one student? Isn’t one student who has to face that type of racist comment enough to address it as a school?*

Notions of equity and access present another challenge to creating inclusive schools. In many schools, curricula and programs suffer as a result of federal mandates. For example, art, music, and foreign language programs are often eliminated and replaced with more math and reading programs to meet Adequate Yearly Progress requirements. Consequently, teachers are deskilled and the curriculum becomes a drill-and-kill model of reading and mathematics,
essentially marginalizing disadvantaged students (Ravitch, 2010). Reitzug and O’Hair (2002) support Ravitch’s notion and state:

Instructional emphasis is often on teaching to state-mandated standardized tests designed to measure low-level cognitive skills, rather than on authentic teaching practices that stimulate high-quality intellectual growth in students. This deskilling of teaching results in little emphasis being placed on teacher knowledge and expertise. (p. 119)

**Power**

Power and hierarchical school structures present barriers to inclusive schools. Those in power, usually school leaders, control who has a voice in the school’s decision-making processes, leaving minority and low-income parents and students to feel silenced in the school setting (Delpit, 1988). As a result of such power hierarchies, parents and students who struggle with school the most are often the group who is left out of such decision-making processes (Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2009). For example, parents and students who speak another language or parents who work more than one job find it difficult to engage in the school. Thus, school leaders face significant challenges to find opportunities for these marginalized groups to engage in decision-making processes. However, critics argue that shared decision-making and collaborative processes “will waste people’s time, delay important decisions, raise operating costs, and increase workloads. But if hierarchies remain, efforts at inclusion will also be fake” (Ryan, 2006, p. 13).

**Exclusion From Learning**

Students are also excluded from the learning process in a subtle manner. As an example, Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of “cultural capital,” or “valued resources” (Ryan, 2006) plays a role in exclusionary practices in schools. Students who can conform to the normed values of the organization are often rewarded for exhibiting those behaviors in school; those who cannot conform are often excluded. Often, school excludes students because students do not know the
norms and culture of the school itself. Therefore, social class hierarchy and privileges afforded to middle class students impact students’ experiences in school (Bourdieu, 1991; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Delpit, 1988; Ryan, 2006). In other words, students from middle class backgrounds who possess certain kinds of ‘cultural capital’ and can act, think, and talk in certain ways have an advantage of those students who cannot. As Ryan (2006) states, “schools exclude some students from activities by requiring them to have attributes or resources associated with cultural capital that they do not possess” (p. 25).

Lack of Dialogue

The entire social arrangement called “school” should be designed around this purpose of introducing children to the life of dialogue (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 4).

Teacher: Mrs. Orzel—you won’t believe this.
Mrs. Orzel: What?

Teacher: I had the conversation with my students this morning. Every, single student said that they had heard students in our building called terrorist and suicide bomber.

Mrs. Orzel: Really? So what did you do?

Teacher: We spent the entire period discussing it. Did you know that many of our Arabic students are being called this? Did you know that our Arabic students don’t want to come to school because of these comments?

Mrs. Orzel: I can imagine. It’s horrible. So what did your class say about it?

Teacher: We are going to make time weekly to discuss it, but we all agreed that as a school we need to talk about it. Do you think we could make it part of our Advisory lessons next week since it appears to be impacting the school? So many of my students said they feel awful about it but don’t know how to address it. I think we need to help them.

Mrs. Orzel: Sounds great. Why don’t you put something together for the staff and we can continue the discussion next week in Advisory?

Teacher: Great, but I really want the students to help me. Is that ok?

Mrs. Orzel: I think it’s a great idea. Thanks for your leadership.
As previously stated, perhaps the biggest challenge to creating inclusive school communities is the lack of dialogue and conversation in the school setting. At the forefront of educational policies and reform efforts are centralized curriculum and testing processes which minimize classroom conversations. (2004) states that the classroom is a “feminized—and racially domestic sphere [that] politicians—most(ly) white men—are determined to control, disguised by apparently commonsensical claims of “accountability” (p. xiii). Such control diminishes dialogic relations in the classroom and perpetuates power structures and hierarchies in schools.

Thus, a strong need for dialogue exists in today’s school systems. Yet, as a result of mandates, many schools eliminate dialogue in the classroom. Some scholars, like Burbules (1993), use dialogue in an instrumental way, as a tool. Others, like Sidorkin (1999), Bakhtin (1984), and Shields (2009) view dialogue, ontologically, as a way of life. In the latter view, dialogue is a disposition of being open to the other that fosters deeper understanding. Sidorkin (1999) suggests that “it is the lack of language for describing what works in schools that . . . prevents educators from turning every school into a good place to spend one’s childhood” (p. 2). Sidorkin also asserts, “There must be a multitude of distinctive voices, these voices must hear each other, and there must be some moments when these voices become ‘purely human’” (p. 112). In other words, schools must create conditions where multiple voices can be heard and there is mutual listening and understanding of all voices. With that, Sidorkin also cautions that nothing can guarantee dialogue, but that dialogue is much more likely to occur if people are exposed to all voices in constant interaction and not just one dominant voice. Similarly, Shields (2009) supports the notion of dialogue and connects the idea to educational leadership when she states, “As educational leaders, we must be present through initiating and facilitating the
dialogue that permits all voices to be heard” (p. 111). Thus, a strong need for dialogue is evident, and school leaders need to provide spaces for dialogue to occur.

**Problem Statement**

*Mrs. Orzel: Why don’t we all go back to our 1st period classes today and ask if anyone has ever heard someone in our building called a terrorist or suicide bomber?*

*Teacher: I am not comfortable with that.*

*Mrs. Orzel: Why not?*

*Teacher: Because it is probably just one student. Why should take time out of my lesson to talk to a group of students who is probably doesn’t affect anyway?*

*Mrs. Orzel: Don’t we care about each, individual student? Let’s just have the conversation today and we’ll report back as a staff. I hear what you’re saying about the importance of students learning content; however, we have to focus on the social aspect and have expectations for social and emotional needs, too. If you’re right and no one in your class has heard that comment to our students then you’ll be able to move on with your lesson, right?*

*Teacher: I guess you’re right. I’ll let you know what happens.*

*Mrs. Orzel: Thanks. I appreciate you taking the time to have the conversation.*

Federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 narrowly frame accountability through standardized testing processes and perpetuate hierarchical, inequitable learning processes. Federal mandates limit educational opportunities, narrow the curriculum, marginalize students’ access to diverse experiences and curricula, and ultimately silence necessary dialogue in schools. Similar to the teacher in Ahmad’s story, educators feel pressured to cover curriculum instead of having needed dialogue with students.

Inequities created by such reform efforts exacerbate educational disparities and leave school leaders facing monumental challenges when trying to create an inclusive school. According to Shields (2009), “inequities are unacceptable in deep conceptions of democratic
schooling . . . educational leaders need to find ways to overcome disparity and to provide more equitable learning environments for all students” (p. 25). The educational disparity is evident and drives current school reform efforts which claim to create inclusive school communities, yet ultimately create failing schools and eliminate critical dialogue.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Education continues to be at the forefront of political and community debates. Parents, politicians, and educators grow increasingly impatient with poor test scores and an increasing achievement gap. Education reform efforts focus on the need for increased accountability and higher standards for all students. To that end, school leaders, specifically, principals, are often blamed if their schools do not meet federal expectations.

Due to the fact that educators are so focused on accountability and standardized testing, reform efforts are perpetuated year after year, but literature suggests that those reforms are not working and more inclusive notions of schooling need to be addressed. Oakes and Rogers (2006) suggest, “the biggest challenge, and arguably the most important, lies in bringing people together across race and social classes to create inclusive, progressive movements . . . Critical public dialogue is not likely to happen without significant trauma and confrontation” (p. 178). Therefore, the purpose of this multiple case study is to understand the relationships between dialogue and inclusive school communities. To address this issue, the research questions of this study include:

1. What is the relationship between dialogue and an inclusive school community?
2. What is the principal’s conception of an inclusive community?
3. What is the role of dialogue in creating an inclusive community?
4. What challenges does a principal face when trying to create an inclusive community and how may they be overcome?

**Rationale of the Study**

Until recently, minimal attention has been focused toward inclusive leadership practices which address the unintended exclusion of some students. Recent literature indicates, and federal mandates substantiate, that issues of school reform cannot be separated from inclusive practices focused on dialogue, equity, and democratic principles. According to Shields (2009):

> We need to recognize the forces that prevent social institutions from creating inclusive communities in which all educators and students can safely bring the totality and complexity of their identities as a basis for their learning. We must create learning environments in which all children can build on their personal experiences, the values of their cultures, and the languages they speak at home, in order to make sense of what they are learning. (p. 32)

This study interested me for theoretical, empirical, and personal reasons. As will be addressed in the literature review, there are theories and studies related to inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2006) and the critical role of the principal (Furman & Shields, 2005; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Ryan, 2006). These topics are critical to examine, but research often separates the two ideas. The starting point for this study was to identify schools considered to be “inclusive” and then to explore the relationships between dialogue and inclusive schools. Thus, I examined dialogue utilized by principals who strive to create inclusive schools to provide equitable access to all students, particularly those marginalized. The research studied if a school has a greater potential for success when transformed into an inclusive learning community and whether dialogic leadership was required to make the transformation. Specifically, the study examined the relationship between the principals’ use of dialogue and inclusive school communities.
On a personal level, this study was intriguing to me from several perspectives: as a former K-12 student, as a former middle school and high school English teacher, as a current practicing K-12 principal, as a current doctoral student, and as a future superintendent of schools. In each case, though I always enjoyed school, I did not realize that I had led a privileged, yet sheltered, life throughout my entire K-12 school experience. In fact, it was not until I had been in education as both a teacher and administrator for nine years that I realized that, not only was I a product of a White, dominant, privileged school system, but also that I was also perpetuating it as a school leader in my own school. Through exposure from my doctoral program to literature and research on democratic schooling, dialogue, leadership, and equity, I began to realize the impact of hierarchical, power-dominated school reform systems of education. Through that exposure, I took an interest in dialogue, principal leadership, and the creation of inclusive school communities. As a practicing principal and as an aspiring superintendent, the research became more personal and imperative as I was forced to consider and to implement educational reform initiatives. From these experiences, I learned first-hand that dialogue for understanding was lacking in both classrooms and among faculty.

**Definition of Terms**

**Inclusive Leadership**

For many people, inclusion refers to a term about students with disabilities, or special education. However, for the purposes of this study, inclusive leadership will be defined as a process which “promotes the ideals of inclusion, democracy, and social justice more generally . . . across schools and communities . . . ensuring all members of the school community and their
perspectives are included fairly in all school processes, especially in learning processes” (Ryan, 2006, p. 14).

**Inclusive School Community**

For the purposes of this study, an inclusive school community is defined as one that creates equitable opportunities and access for all members of the school community, especially parents and students of low socio-economic and minority backgrounds. Inclusive schools are places where all voices are heard and parents and students have a voice into decision-making processes and curriculum.

**Community**

Using a postmodern viewpoint, the term “community” will be defined as a “community of difference” (Shields, 2002) which encompasses an “acceptance of otherness and cooperation within difference” (Furman, 2002).

**Dialogue**

Dialogue relates to understanding another perspective or others’ feelings, values, or views to come to a deeper understanding or meaning. It is more than just a form of communication and transcends mere discussion. Rather, for the purposes of this study, dialogue will be defined in an ontological perspective as “the very act of developing relationships with other people and with the subject matter itself . . . it represents the flowing through of ideas to promote reflection, critical analysis, and, ultimately, democratic action” (Shields, 2009, p. 159). Similarly, Bakhtin believes dialogue is both ontological and a way of life (Shields, 2007).
Overview of the Literature

In chapter 2, I provide a review of the relevant literature specific to the study and create a theoretical framework for the study. The major themes of the literature review include the notions of inclusive leadership, community, and dialogue.

Literature surrounding inclusive leadership (Capper, 1993; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Moller, 2004; Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2009) will provide a basis to examine challenges facing leaders who wish to create inclusive communities. Once inclusive leadership is explored, the literature will explore the need to establish community. In this section, I provide a comparison of modern versus postmodern constructions of community by reviewing the works of Bellah, et al. (2008), Capper (1993), Furman (2002), Riehl, (2000), Ryan (2006), Sergiovanni (1994), Shields (2002; 2009), and Tonnies (2002) to show the differences between a modern and postmodern view of community and how a postmodern approach requires inclusive leadership and dialogue.

Finally, by using Shields and Edwards (2005) theory of dialogical leadership as a conceptual framework, I provide a five-dimensional theoretical framework using the notions of inclusive leadership, community, ontology, understanding, and relationships that center around the concept of dialogue. In this section, I examine dialogue through a number of authors with conflicting perspectives, Bahtkin (1984), Buber (1970), Burbules (1993), Freire (2000a), Gadamer (2004), Shields (2009), Shields & Edwards (2005), and Sidorkin (1999) and develop a concept of dialogue that constitutes the theoretical framework for this study and guides the methodology, including the interview questions and protocol, and comprises a preliminary analytical framework for looking at the data.
Overview of the Method

By utilizing a case study method (Yin, 2008), I examined the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools. This enabled an in-depth look at three schools in order to better understand how principals use of dialogue can create inclusive learning communities within a school system. I utilized a multi-case approach to better understand the principals’ conceptions of inclusive community, as well as to examine and observe, in all different contexts, the role of dialogue and challenges associated with inclusive leadership.

Interviews were transcribed and coded by themes. I also surveyed teachers at each of the three schools to examine their understanding of inclusive schools and to better understand how their principals conceptualized and used dialogue. In addition, student focus groups, consisting of three to five students at each school, were conducted to gain insight into students’ observations about dialogue and inclusive school communities. Observational data were obtained through site visits and team meetings. Data analysis included analysis of emergent themes from both interviews and observational data.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

The study was conducted under several limitations. For example, the study was limited to a small sampling of three school sites. The study sites were chosen using a reputational approach based on the principal’s reported commitment to democratic principles and philosophy of inclusive education. By using this approach, it is possible that schools which encompass the criteria of an inclusive school, ones which are democratic, equitable, and socially just, were not identified by the reputational approach method because the experts who identified schools were not familiar with all schools; however, the purpose was not to identify all schools. Rather, the
purpose was to examine those schools and principals which were identified by the experts. Additionally, another limitation existed because the self-reporting by the principals who were studied may not be completely accurate.

Delimitations also existed. For example, a delimitation of the study was the fact that the study was centered on the role of the principal. Therefore, the study was narrowed in scope as the researcher focused on the principal and not on the school organization or other school members. The study did not focus on the role of students or teachers in creating an inclusive school because the study centered on dialogue and inclusive schools. Additionally, I did not review literature on teacher leadership or shared leadership because the central focus of the study examined the school leader’s role. Finally, while Stake’s (2005) notion of thick description was important to the study, the methodology utilized a stronger emphasis on analysis and interpretation in order to explore the notion of an inclusive school community and hence drew more appropriately from the works of Merriam (2009) and Yin (2008).

**Significance of Study**

High standards and expectations for all students drive current school reform efforts. This study sought to help the reader understand the journey from exclusive, hierarchical structures to inclusive, democratic schools. In particular, the study helped the reader examine the relationships between dialogue and inclusive schooling, inclusive leadership practices from a principal’s perspective, including the principal’s conception of an inclusive school, obstacles encountered, and strategies the principal used to help focus on democratic, socially just learning communities.

As previously stated, exclusion occurs daily for students, especially disadvantaged students who may be marginalized because of their ethnicity, gender, and/or social class. This
study sought to examine such exclusionary practices for students and to understand the role of the dialogue in overcoming exclusion in school settings.

The literature surrounding inclusive leadership tends to focus on special education and professional learning communities, but there is very little emphasis on the principal’s role in creating inclusive school communities. Information obtained from this study provided specific examples of ways that principals can create spaces for dialogue to occur. For example, current school leaders may use information from this study to better engage parents and community by providing structures and opportunities for all voices in the school community to be heard. Furthermore, this study may help educators and politicians to create alternative measures of a school’s success rather than a narrow measure of a standardized test score. By having a better understanding of what an inclusive school community looks like, we will also be able to examine how school success is measured.

Additionally, prospective principals in pre-service leadership programs will gain insight into leadership practices necessary to engage in inclusive leadership in schools. Principals who exit leadership programs may be more apt to include inclusive leadership practices as they enter the principalship.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Recent accountability and standards-driven movements draw attention to inequities in educational opportunities for various groups of students and place the burden on educational leaders and policy makers. Similarly, teachers face challenges to meet all students’ needs while meeting stringent achievement expectations. Due to these reform efforts, teachers are deskilled, and students lose opportunities in the classroom to participate in engaging dialogue and rich curriculum.

Although student populations continue to become more diverse each year, school leaders often remain stagnant in their practices, and school structures rarely change to meet the diverse populations they serve. Not only do principals face challenges meeting the federal and state demands placed upon them, they also have diversity in all aspects of their school buildings. Diversity is present in ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender differences, ability, and class; principals must lead inclusive schools which encompass all aspects of their diverse, multifaceted communities.

Although school reform efforts claim to advocate for more inclusive and equitable outcomes, routine, technical, managerial, and scientific approaches in education are still prevalent and often utilized in school systems. As an example, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 advocated for 100% children being “proficient” by the year 2014, but as previously stated, President Obama is currently presenting a “flexibility package” for states to obtain a waiver to opt of this expectation. No Child Left Behind failed to recognize the needs of the individual child and instead focused on students’ performance on one standardized test; thus, schools making significant progress are labeled as failing schools if they do not meet the established proficiency
target. By mandating a 100% proficiency rate, Ravitch (2010) argues that states actually lowered their standards, dumbed-down the curriculum, and “stigmatized schools that could not meet this unrealistic expectation.” To that end, the most recent national tests show that no improvement has been made in 8th grade reading since 1998. Needless to say, with the hope of No Child Left Behind dwindling, reform efforts have been heavily debated in the past few years.

Consequently, while the political and economic demands increase, so does control and monitoring of teacher and administrator practices, leaving school leaders questioning the true purposes of education and teachers eliminating critical dialogue in schools. To support that notion, Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest:

In order to achieve the multiple purposes of schooling and to reconcile the competing political, social, cultural, and economic demands placed on educators, more and more people are becoming interested in the moral purposes of leadership, in ethical leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992), and in the potential of dialogue as a focus for teaching and leadership (Burbules, 1993; Edwards & Shields, 2002) . . . As educators we have failed to create schools that are just, excellent, inclusive, and deeply democratic. (p. 3)

This literature review comprises an overview of the scholarly literature surrounding inclusive schools, community, and dialogue, building into the theoretical perspective of the study. First, inclusive leadership is examined. Second, leadership practices and the role of community are explored as they relate to inclusive schools. Third, the role of dialogue is discussed and connects principal leadership practices and dialogical relationships to the importance of inclusive leadership and community. Finally, these three components provide the foundation for the theoretical framework of the study that focuses on dialogic relations and the connections and interrelations between dialogue, relationships, understanding, and leadership.
Inclusive Leadership

Many argue that education is in crisis (Bode, 2001; Barber, 2001; Giroux, 2002; Lipman; 1998; Lewis & Macedo, 1996; Peck, 1993) and reform is needed. Exclusionary practices are deeply rooted in today’s educational system, as racism, classism, and sexism continue to plague American students’ school experiences. Despite No Child Left Behind’s surface attempt to engage marginalized students, routinized school system approaches to standardized testing procedures perpetuate these patterns of exclusionary practices. Students who need engaging, rich, and diverse curriculum are often the same students who receive the ‘drill and kill’ rote curriculum. This next section discusses the importance of inclusive leadership in schools and how that leadership connects to the larger context of building community.

Challenges Facing School Leaders

Schools as institutions are isolated, tightly controlled organizations which leave little room for dialogue and diversity. As Ryan (2006) states:

In a democratic society or, for that matter, any society, humanity has an obligation to see that everyone is included fairly not just in schooling processes but in all social, cultural, economic, and political institutions. Everyone has the right to participate in what the world has to offer and to reap the benefits of this involvement. Regrettably, at this time, this is not happening. (p. 9)

To support that notion, Shields (2009) states, “When we think of schools as institutions, we tend not only to deskill teachers, but also to destroy their sense of agency and personal control. In turn . . . students are also deskilled and dehumanized” (p. 131). In order to provide collaborative relationships instead of traditional hierarchies, leaders must provide equitable, caring, and fluid relationships to foster dialogue. Ryan (2006) suggests:

The task for leadership . . . is to raise the consciousness of people so that they can recognize widespread and harmful exclusive practices like racism and sexism and do something about them. This requires that school communities perpetually raise questions about what they do and about the wider context within which learning and schooling occurs. (p. 58)
Principals face significant challenges in creating inclusive schools. In order to promote inclusive leadership in schools, principals must not only promote academic achievement, but also prepare students for a pluralistic, democratic society. Astin and Astin (2000) support that notion and state, “the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life” (p. 6). Several other scholars would also support the idea that leadership should value equity and social justice, yet these notions are rarely considered the purpose of school leaders in today’s educational field. For example, Moller (2009) discusses a shift in process to a shift in outcomes and accountability. He states, “However, by this shift in focus there is a risk of ignoring some of the most critical purposes of public schooling, for example preparation for participation in a democratic society or processes that creates and sustains social justice” (p. 40). Similarly, Shields (2009) suggests that those in formal positions of leadership “must choose to exercise their power in moral ways to intervene in the processes and content of schooling to create learning environments that include all children” (p. 152). To that end, Frattura and Capper (2007) call for “revolutionary strategies” in rethinking leadership practices to address diverse needs of students (p. 4). As a result, in order for school leaders to become inclusive leaders, they must incorporate these “revolutionary strategies” and include both the academic excellence component of education and be socially just leaders. Rarely do school leader job descriptions discuss or define “socially just” expectations. However, if a principal is to create an inclusive school community, leadership must involve aspects of social justice.

Challenges to creating and leading a socially just, inclusive school are evident. Diverse school populations coupled with inequitable access to school programs, opportunities, and curricula create barriers to socially just environments; however, while increasing diversity is a prevalent topic for school leaders, it is ultimately the educational system’s policies and structures
that create the inequities in the school (Frattura & Capper, 2010). Thus, inclusive leaders must face the challenge to move beyond the discussion of challenges in education and become activists for caring communities where relationships are central. Dantley and Tillman (2010) suggest that creating socially just schools starts with educational leaders. They state, “We must move from passive discourse and involvement to conscious, deliberate, and proactive practice in educational leadership that will produce socially just outcomes for all children” (p. 31). Therefore, scholars argue that socially just and deeply democratic outcomes are vital for inclusive leadership approaches.

**Inclusive Leadership Approaches**

Leadership styles and approaches are varied, and not all approaches promote inclusive leadership. In fact, some forms of leadership can be viewed as one-sided and may actually promote power imbalances in school settings. Ryan (2003) suggests that inclusive leadership practices show more promise than power-driven practices in that inclusive practices are more communal and mutual instead of exclusionary. He states, “Inclusive forms of practice and attention to global forms of power and justice, critique, action and dialogue will help, rather than hinder opportunities and life chances of traditionally marginalized groups” (p. 59). Therefore, inclusive school leaders play a critical role and must pay attention to opportunities and power to provide access to marginalized students.

The role of the principal in creating an inclusive school is vital. To support that point, Ryan (2003) suggests, “Principals are in ideal positions to promote inclusion. . . . Moreso than perhaps any other individual, they have the power to shape leadership practices that are consistent with inclusion” (p. 171). In the same sense, Shields asserts that “the task of the leader is to have a clear vision, to express it articulately and symbolically in ways that attract others,
and then to help people work together to create an inclusive and deeply democratic school” (p. 146). As a result, through inclusive principal leadership practices, the literature suggests the key to creating inclusive communities is to provide access for all students. Capper (1993) supports that notion and claims, “administrators . . . have a responsibility not only to provide an education that is inclusive of, and meaningful to, all students in the district . . . but to be sure students have access to information about identities and cultures representative of the diversity of society” (p. 292). Thus, principals possess a great deal of influence to provide access and opportunities for all students.

Finally, the role of the educational leader must be to create inclusive communities that promote deep democracy. Moller (2004) suggests that the role of the principal is to educate students to be citizens of a democracy. With that, she states that educators have a responsibility to “reveal conditions that create social inequalities in school, including a consideration of the ways in which external social structures are reproduced through the administration of schooling” (p. 45). Thus, Moller puts a great deal of emphasis and responsibility on the role of the principal. Similarly, Green’s (1999) notion of deep democracy enables leaders to think deeply and critically about creating democratic citizens. Green suggests that “a limited, formal conception of democracy contrasts with a deeper conception of democracy that expresses the experienced-based possibility of more equal, respectful, and mutually beneficial ways of community life” (p. vi) and “sustainable transformation requires the development of a deeper democracy” (p. 202). To that end, Shields (2009) asserts that education must be both deeply democratic and socially just. She encourages educational leaders to “prepare students to live in a democracy by teaching the skills and dispositions to live in mutually beneficial relations with others . . . it [a multi-faceted approach to dialogue] requires educators to give students opportunities to practice
democracy” (p. 6). As a result, leaders must keep deep democracy as a central focus to overcome the dichotomy between academic excellence expectations and conceptions of social justice, equity, and access.

**Equity and Access**

As previously stated, state and federal mandates place pressure on school leaders, teachers, and students. While these mandates were designed to target and eliminate achievement gaps for minority students and students from low-income families, they have had unintended consequences for the students, especially the students it was intended to benefit (Ravitch, 2010). As a result, teachers too often rely on test-prep to meet high-stakes testing environments, the curriculum is narrowed, critical music, art, and history experiences are eliminated, and states have lowered their expectations for student achievement (Ravitch, 2010; Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2009). Thus, equitable, accessible school structures and processes are vital elements of an inclusive school.

Inclusive leadership practices provide equitable access to resources, curriculum, programs, and opportunities. Darling-Hammond (1997) highlights the disparities in education by drawing attention to affluent communities and resources and across states. She cautions that such disparities are a threat to the foundation of a democratic society and claims, “The victims of social inequality and education inadequacy are trapped in a growing underclass. . . . Ultimately, everyone pays, financially and socially, the resulting costs to the broader society” (p. 262).

School leaders are faced with challenges of providing accessible and equitable access for all students. As a result, educational leadership is a critical role in today’s schools; Shields (2009) calls to educators to attend to issues of equity and access and states:

Although education offers both individual and social benefits, access to these benefits is unequal. Many complex factors—relating to history, social and cultural organization,
persistent race and class barriers, and so forth—create conditions under which the individual benefits of education are more readily accessible to members of the (largely White) middle and upper classes than to members of most visible minority groups in the United States. Nevertheless, in democratic education, the goal is a collective one; hence the clarion call of critical educators to attend to issues of equity and social justice is so urgent. (p. 51)

Thus, Shields calls to school leaders to take a responsibility to address inequities in the school system, and issues of access and inequities become a main focus for leaders wishing to create inclusive school systems.

Focus on Community

Building upon the inclusive leadership literature, school leaders must envision, create, and sustain a strong parent and community focus when creating an inclusive school community. Thus, parent and community involvement is a crucial piece of inclusive leadership. At its most surface-level, parent involvement involves volunteering in classrooms, yet some school leaders reach beyond the surface to involve parents in dialogue surrounding policy and decision making processes to promote inclusive school communities. The connection between inclusive leadership, social justice, community, and relationships is strong. As Riehl (2000) suggests:

> When wedded to a relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice, administrators’ efforts in the tasks of sensemaking, promoting inclusive cultures and practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside of the school may indeed foster a new form of practice. (p. 71)

Building positive relationships, as Riehl suggests, is important to building community; however, little research has focused on how the various perspectives of school leaders contribute to a “better understanding of the concept of a community of difference” (Shields, 2002, p. 145). While the gap in the literature exists, there appears to be a strong connection between inclusive leadership and community.
School leaders must realize that schools are a critical element within the larger community that influence and shape students’ lives. Oliva, Anderson, and Byng (2010) support that notion and suggest that school leaders must “vigilantly monitor their interaction with stakeholders in the broader community out of schools” (p. 285). Without a strong community focus, inclusive leadership appears superficial, yet the aspect of community is vital. Peck (1993) argues the need for community when he states that there are very few “true communities” (p. 276). Thus, this next section will build on the idea of inclusive leadership and explore the notion of community.

**Understanding a Postmodern View of Community**

In order to understand community in the context of inclusive schools, it is important to provide literature surrounding the notion of community. Various definitions and meanings exist for community. For example, Peck (1993) suggests that community requires communication and defines a “genuine community” as “a group of whose members have made a commitment to communicate with one another on an ever more deep and authentic level” (p. 276), whereas Furman (2002) discusses the notion of community as a village, while Sergiovanni (1994) suggests that schools are communities. Nevertheless, scholars debate modern and postmodern perspectives relative to community.

There are many visions of community. One of the most common assumptions associated with community is a modernist view which suggests that everyone in the community is the same, or has common, shared norms and values. For example, German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (1887/2002) discusses the notion of community through a Gemeinschaft (community)/Gesellschaft (society) framework. He asserts, “All intimate, private and exclusive living together . . . is understood as life in Gemeinschaft (community). Gesellschaft (society) is public life—it is
the world itself” (p. 33). Tonnies’ notion of community is based on these two social groupings. Tonnies believed that the more complex the social structure, the less personal the relationship becomes. Gemeinschaft, or community, comprises feelings of togetherness and can be characterized through the notions of families, neighborhoods, or villages. Conversely, Gesellschaft, or society, lacks the human relatedness of Gemeinschaft but yet is driven by an instrumental goal. Therefore, Tonnies believed that both social groupings were important to the notion of community because they provided a bridge and balance to each other.

Sergiovanni (1994) draws on Tonnies’ notion of community through these two social structures and, like Tonnies, demonstrates that neither social structure can create community on its own. Rather, Sergiovanni suggests that we must build community within society. Thus, he calls for a change in the metaphor of organizations to one of communities through establishing a shared vision for schools. He states:

Communities are socially organized around relationships and the felt interdependencies that nurture them. Instead of being tied together and tied to purposes by bartering arrangements, this social structure bonds people together in special ways and binds them to concepts, images, and values that comprise a shared structure idea. This bonding and binding are the defining characteristics of schools as communities. (p. 217)

Thus, Sergiovanni believes that schools operated from a social perspective provide educators with an opportunity to create a sense of belonging and a connectedness to others’ ideas and values. As a result, community building is important because connections between people is important and should be a basis for school reform.

Schools are not comprised of similarities; rather, schools are diverse in their faculties, student groups, perspectives, and philosophies. Consequently, a modernist, “one best way” approach contradicts the purpose of inclusive school communities. Furman (2002) supports that notion and asserts:
Community is assumed to be based on commonalities—yet school populations are increasingly diverse. . . . Efforts to build community in schools that focus on “centering” certain values over others may have the perverse effect of alienating members of the school population who do not share those values, thus defeating the intended purpose of community. (p. 51)

Therefore, a postmodern definition of community provides a multi-faceted framework for inclusive schools.

A postmodern approach to community provides a diverse perspective for inclusive school communities. As previously mentioned, community themes and assumptions about the term have focused on shared values from a particular group of individuals; however, this idea limits multiple perspectives and defeats the intended purpose of viewing community from various viewpoints. As Furman (2002) suggests:

The assumption that community membership hinges on commonalities or sameness—on the values, cultural background, kinship relationships and so on that are held in common by community members—is a product of modernist thinking and theorizing, which is friendly to dominant centers or “one best way” of doing things. (p. 52)

In this way, Furman reminds us that schools are not places where “one best way” is appropriate; schools are diverse and “reflect the multilingual, multicultural diversity of the postmodern world” (p. 56). Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2008) support that notion and describe community as “an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all” (p. 72). However, Bellah has been criticized for favoring cultural homogeneity and viewing community as a geographically bound unit, similar to a small town. Bellah (2007) disputes these “misreadings” and asserts:

Our definition of community is not at all geographically bounded: we explicitly include everything from the family to the nation as a community or a potential one, and our definition is deeply plural, since we recognize the positive significance of the wide variety of culturally heterogeneous communities in America. . . . Above all . . . we do not belong to one and only one community, but to many overlapping and cross-cutting communities, and that is part of the vitality of our society. (p. 192)
In this response, Bellah addresses the criticism of his view of community and provides a more diverse perspective of the term. However, Bellah does not specifically include or address issues of multiculturalism as part of his discussion of community.

Furman (2002) uses the term postmodernism as it relates to the social world and encourages us to consider how a postmodern view of community can enhance schools. She suggests, “Efforts to build community in school should take into account this postmodern context and should help students learn to live in a postmodern, multicultural, global community” (Furman, 2002, p. 56). In other words, schools must shift from a modernist view of “sameness” to a postmodern view of “otherness.” Similarly, Shields (2002) suggests a “community of difference” where “common beliefs and values will not be assumed, but as members negotiate from positions reflecting their disparate norms, beliefs, and values, they will recognize that, despite some fundamental differences, there are also some significant commonalities that unite them” (p. 197). In this postmodern view of community, schools develop community through listening to all voices of the members of the community. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the term “community” can be viewed as a “community of difference” (Shields & Edwards, 2005) which encompasses an “acceptance of otherness and cooperation within difference” (Furman, 2002).

**Connecting Student Learning and Community**

Community members, especially parents, express concerns about student learning. Inclusive leaders should make the connection between inclusive practices, the community, and student learning. Educating the community about inclusive practices is vital, and school leaders must provide inclusive practices that also emphasize student learning and improvement to
teaching practices. School leaders must establish clear goals, collaborate often, take risks, and monitor the progress of students. Ryan (2006) asserts:

Research is clear on the best ways of delivering curriculum in inclusive ways . . . it has found that students are generally included when the school honors different ways of knowing and different sources of knowledge, when it allows students to write and speak in their own vernacular, and when it employs culturally compatible communication styles. (p. 123)

In other words, school leaders must educate both the community and teachers on inclusive practices that will have an impact on student learning.

Inclusive leaders must educate their school communities on what fair and comprehensive assessment should entail. As previously mentioned, most school systems continue to operate under hierarchical, routinized structures because education reforms use evaluation tools which are exclusive instead of inclusive, which ultimately deskills teachers while excluding and marginalizing students. By understanding these processes, communities must work around these systems to include multiple, fair, and equitable assessments to measure student learning and progress (Ravitch, 2010; Ryan, 2006). As a result, by deskill ing teachers and creating a high stakes testing atmosphere, students who need the most support, low income and minority students, have been marginalized (Shields, 2008). Lewis and Macedo (1996) suggest that power in education can impact marginalized students and he discusses how students are “flung to the margins.” If schools only focus on reading and math by the top-down, efficiency, bureaucratic notions of the past will not be able to move forward and progress to create democratic, inclusive communities.

In order for school communities to become more inclusive, they must be directly involved and engaged in policy and decision-making processes. Ryan (2006) suggests that all stakeholders are represented and that they have an “equal and fair opportunities to influence the outcome of the processes” (p. 128). However, Ryan also cautions that while some communities
welcome this collaboration, some stakeholders do not wish to engage in decision-making at the school level because they feel powerless or silenced. Inclusive school leaders must get to know the community, find ways to give all stakeholders a voice into decision-making, and see the world from different points of view (Ryan, 2006).

Creating a sense of community largely impacts inclusive leadership practices. As community is developed in an inclusive school, differences are accepted as trust, safety, and belonging are fostered. Therefore, a strong connection between inclusive leadership, community, and democratic principles exists, which incorporates the next piece of the literature review, dialogue.

**Dialogue as a Foundation for Inclusive Schools**

Inclusive leaders provide socially just and deeply democratic environments for all students. Through inclusive leadership, community is transformed and created to support inclusive practices. For both inclusive leadership and building community, one key element is essential, dialogue. “Dialogue is the very act of developing relationships with other people and with the subject matter itself . . . it represents a flowing through of ideas to promote reflection, critical analysis, and ultimately, democratic action” (Shields, 2009, p. 159). To build inclusive schools, leaders must recognize that dialogue is critical and the foundation for building such relationships.

Some leaders shy away from conflict and from the difficult conversations that must occur in order to move the organization forward. However, Glass (2003) discusses the role of conflict in a pluralistic society and says that conflict should be expected. Similarly, Shields (2009) asserts, “It is . . . important for leaders to understand the critical positive role that conflict can
play” (p. 139). In other words, in order to lead, leaders must understand conflict, challenge the status quo, and create opportunities for open dialogue and communication. To that end, leaders in a democratic society are faced with the challenge of creating dialogic, inclusive communities. Thus, the literature suggests community building as a critical role of the inclusive school leader. Through dialogue, a sense of community is established, which leads into the next section of the literature review, a focus on community.

This next section of the literature connects inclusive school leadership, community, and dialogue, and ultimately builds to the theoretical framework of dialogic relationships.

**Understanding Dialogue**

Dialogue seems, in its most simple sense, easy to understand; however, the theoretical concept of dialogue is intricate, complex, and transcends beyond the meaning of words or having a conversation with another person. Dialogue is not a new concept; in fact, scholars have long been completing significant research in the field of dialogue. However, competing viewpoints exist about the notion of dialogue. As an example, Burbules (1993) suggests:

The status of dialogue as a source of knowledge and understanding, as a medium for interpersonal discourse, and as a pedagogical relation has been a central topic of interest and dispute. Specifically, among various writers on education and society, especially those writing from contemporary “postmodern” perspectives, dialogue has been a focal point for debating broader conceptions of language, epistemology, ethics, and politics. (p. 2)

As a result, some scholars view dialogue as ontological, or a way of life, while others view it as a “relation we enter into” (Burbules, 1993), or as a tool for teaching and learning, and some use the term as a synonym of “talk.”

Burbules (1993) suggests that dialogue is not just one thing—rather, it is a range of activities with different purposes. He speaks to this notion by identifying four types of dialogue. The first is dialogue as conversation, which suggests that we engage in dialogue of this nature in
order to understanding the perspectives of another. Burbules cautions us to not assume that all conversations are dialogues, and that as conversations occur, there are often both understanding and misunderstanding. Second, Burbules discusses the notion of dialogue as inquiry. In this, he suggests that we engage in dialogue to answer questions, resolve problems, or reconcile disputes. Burbules asserts that dialogue as inquiry fosters, “a spirit of tolerance and respect for a range of views, with the intention of addressing some sort of question or problem, and with the hope that these differences can be reconciled into at least partial and provisional commonalities” (p. 118). Next, he discusses the third type of dialogue, dialogue as debate. Through this type, a “sharply questioning, skeptical spirit” emerges (p. 119), and participants can benefit from another challenging their perspectives and understanding another side to an argument. Finally, the fourth type of dialogue is dialogue as instruction. This dialogue creates a space for questions and comments to move the discussion toward a conclusion.

Burbules (1993) therefore describes dialogue as a social relation and a basis for teaching when he states:

A successful dialogue involves a willing partnership and cooperation in the face of likely disagreements, confusions, failures, and misunderstandings. Persisting in this process requires a relation of mutual respect, trust, and concern—and part of the dialogical interchange often must relate to the establishment and maintenance of these bonds. (p. 125)

To that end, Burbules (1993) suggests “standards” or “rules” for successful dialogue which include participation, commitment, and reciprocity. Participation involves including all members so that people feel a part of the dialogue. Burbules (1993) explains, “Any participant should be able to raise topics, pose questions, challenge other points of view, or engage in any of the other activities that define the dialogical interaction” (p. 80). Commitment involves coming to an understanding, not necessarily an agreement, especially when conversation might be difficult. Finally, reciprocity suggests that dialogue is respected and “cannot assume that people
will speak the same way, mean the same things, or share the same concerns when they speak” (Burbules, 1993, p. 37). In addition, reciprocity also encompasses “a spirit of mutual respect and concern, and must not rake for granted roles of privilege or expertise” (Burbules, 1993, p. 82). Nevertheless, Burbules reminds us that these “rules” are beneficial but only take us “part of the way toward understanding” dialogue.

A different notion of dialogue stems from an ontological viewpoint. For example, Buber (1970) suggests dialogue as a fundamental way of life and supports the idea that dialogue is a relational ontology when he states, “All actual life is an encounter” (p. 62). He suggests the need to know one’s students and community, and to educate people through relationships for community (Buber, 2001). “Engaging in genuine dialogue enhances the possibilities for meaningful community, and for realizing our unique wholeness” (Kramer, 2003, p. 3). In other words, there is a strong connection between relationships, dialogue, and community. Bakhtin (1984) also supports that connection and provides insight into dialogue as a way of understanding, or a way of life. He states:

To live means to participate in dialogue. . . . In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. (p. 293)

In this way, Bakhtin views dialogue as essential to life. To support that notion, Shields (2007) explains Bakhtin’s philosophy of dialogue and states, “for Bakhtin dialogue is ontological—a way of living life in openness to other who are different from oneself, of relating to people and ideas that remain separate and district from our own” (p. 65). Similarly, Sidorkin (1999) refers to dialogue in an ontological sense that it encompasses “human existence.”

Supporting the notions of Buber and Bakhtin, Sidorkin speaks to dialogue being the center of relationships. He states, “We are truly human only when we are in a dialogical relation
Dialogue becomes the goal in itself, the central purpose of human life” (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 12). Therefore, these scholars view dialogue as a foundation of being or a way of life.

While scholars debate the notion of dialogue through both ontological and non-ontological perspectives, the importance of dialogue in schools is clear, yet some researchers argue against importance of dialogue, perhaps interpreting it simply as talk. Several authors like Ellsworth (1989), Lugones and Spelman (1983), and Jones (1999) argue that dialogue does not fit all cultures and marginalized populations and that dialogue can be threatening, exclusionary, and an impediment to inclusivity. It is important to note that these authors critique the notion of dialogue as talk and do not address dialogue from an ontological perspective—one that is a way of life that promotes understanding. For example, Ellsworth (1989) argues that dialogue is impossible. Similarly, Lugones and Spelman (1983) speak to the differences among women and how they are silenced. In one episode, a Hispanic woman shares, “We and you do not talk the same language . . . since your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experiences of exclusion. ComPLAINING about exclusion is a way of remaining silent” (p. 575). To that end, Jones (1999) challenges the notion of inclusivity and dialogue when she states:

So it turns out that the real exclusion here is not that of the subordinate at all. It is the dominant group’s exclusion from their ability to hear the voice of the marginalized. This silence in the ears of the powerful is misrecognized as the silence of the subordinate and it reproduces their exclusion. (p. 3)

Therefore, Ellsworth, Lugones, and Jones argue that dialogue is actually an impediment to inclusivity. However, these scholars only address dialogue as talk and do not provide insight into the meaning of dialogue in this study, which is one that promotes understanding and a way of life.
To support that point, Shields and Edwards (2005) caution, “Dialogue is not just talk.” Thus, the point in sharing different perspectives of dialogue is to understand that dialogue is not a new term, concept, or phrase; rather, it is a “way for us to understand something or someone who is in some way different than ourselves, who has a different perspective, alternative lens, varied history” (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 15).

Thus, it is important to note that, although scholars debate dialogue as ontological or dialogue as a tool, that I view dialogue from an ontological perspective for the purposes of this study. Similar to the work of Bakhtin, I take the stance that dialogue is not just talk. Rather, it is a way of being and a way of life. It does invite reciprocity and therefore, is not just a tool. Instead, it is a whole openness to others. Hence, it is a way of life and a way of being.

Dialogue and Postmodernism

Educational leadership continues to be influenced by the early notions of management theory. Technical and bureaucratic approaches to education have limited dialogue in school settings, which has ultimately impacted inclusive school communities. As an example, some argue that positivist, modern views develop one-sided, narrow perspectives about the world. Such scholars argue that much of the current educational reform efforts lack a postmodern view; rather, they argue that reform efforts include a modern, one-sided view. Mary Parker Follett’s (1924) and Frederick Taylor’s (1911) notions of scientific management are examples of such routinized, mechanistic structures. Scientific management operates from top-down implementation and a ‘one size fits all’ expectation. Similar to today’s expectations of NCLB, where one reform effort is expected to fit all students in all schools, ideas from scientific management still permeate our educational system today.
Like Follett, a few scholars expanded the notion of scientific management to bring a humanistic viewpoint. As an example, Mayo’s (1997) Hawthorne studies from the 1940’s examine human productivity in the workplace and suggested that paying attention to the individual increases productivity. Similarly, Greenfield (1993) stresses the importance of school leadership being more than just a science; rather, it is important to look at the context of the human dimension to focus on understanding. In order to understand dialogue in its full context, several scholars suggest that educational leaders need to shift from a modern to postmodern viewpoint.

Some researchers argue that an acknowledgement of a postmodern view of dialogue is vital to inclusive leadership practices, while others caution that postmodernism in its extreme form does not require dialogue at all (Shields & Edwards, 2005). School leaders are confronted with various challenges on a daily basis with parents, students, and community members. Therefore, they must not only understand people through a communicative context, they must understanding multiple perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue to move forward as leaders. As Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest, “A postmodern view of the world, with its recognition and validation of difference, may suggest to the school administrator that dialogue is essential to understanding those with whom she works on a daily basis” (p. 37). On the other hand, Sidorkin (1999) cautions postmodern and modern thinking within a pluralistic world. He states:

The plurality of worldviews only makes sense if used for bringing these worldviews into contact, testing them against each other in the ever-changing context of our common lives. Both modernists and postmodernists do a disservice to this plurality: the former group does so by dismissing it as misunderstanding, the latter one by absolutization of this same plurality. (p. 41)
In this quote, Sidorkin cautions us to avoid delineating between what is and is not postmodernism. Burbules (1993) considers a more “radical” form of postmodernism and dialogue, which he and Rice (1991) term “antimodernism,” where he suggests:

The very possibility of such categories, or any such standards, is denied, leading to a posture that allows for no objectivity, no judgments of better or worse, and—of special concern here—no hope of dialogue and understanding across differences. (p. 4)

However, some scholars suggest that understanding inclusive leadership practices from a postmodern perspective opens the doors to school leaders to view, understand, and learn from different viewpoints and perspectives. For example, Shields and Edwards (2005) claim:

If we are to live in community, to understand what it might mean to create schools that are inclusive, respectful, and deeply democratic, we cannot be satisfied to ignore the claims of others, walking through life without attending to their fundamentally social and relational nature. (p. 38)

Therefore, the literature suggests that inclusive school leaders must enhance the quality of education for students by providing leadership that promotes communities of difference through dialogic relations.

**Power and Dialogue**

Power hierarchies and structures plague school systems and influence dialogic relations. The literature suggests that dialogue is vital to understanding and examining inclusive leadership, community building, school change, and educational reform. For example, Sidorkin (1999) supports the importance of dialogue in schools and asserts, “it is the lack of language for describing what works in schools that among other things prevents educators from turning every school into a good place to spend one’s childhood” (p. 2). To add to that point, Ryan (2006) urges that school leaders provide inclusive schools which give students a voice. He states, “Everyone must have an equal opportunity to speak and must respect other members’ right to speak out to feel safe to talk; all ideas must be tolerated and subjected to fair assessment” (p.
For schools to become inclusive, scholars suggest that dialogue must be at the heart of inclusive leadership practices, and power imbalances must be minimized or eliminated.

Power structures are not only prevalent in inclusive leadership practices, but they also influence dialogue in the school setting, where marginalized groups are often silenced because of power and dominance. Delpit (1988) examined “silenced dialogue” and the culture of power that exists in society today and analyzed five rules of power that impact African American students and students from poverty. These five rules of power include:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. A culture of power exists—there are rules to participate in power.
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 283)

Although Delpit analyzes these rules to show educators power structures within the classroom and their impact on learning, Delpit’s culture of power becomes relevant to inclusive school communities as well. As an example, Delpit stresses the importance of all educators, White or minority acknowledging that power is prevalent in society and in our classrooms when she asserts, “to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same.” Furthermore, Delpit challenges educators to work with African American parents, teachers, and members of poverty-stricken communities when she says:

I am suggesting that appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children’s best interest. Good liberal intentions are not enough. (p. 296)
In this way, Delpit stresses the importance of dialogue as a means to better understand the needs of marginalized populations. Although Delpit’s ideas are specific to the classroom, she addresses power and inclusivity in a broader sense when she asserts:

The dilemma is not really in the debate over instructional methodology, but rather in communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power, of whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and children of color. (p. 296)

Delpit’s ideas are critical to examine in light of this study because they directly relate to how power structures can ultimately silence marginalized groups of individuals. Thus, Delpit argues the idea that successful relational dialogue is directly related to notions of power structures and inclusivity.

Another scholar, Bakhtin (1984), introduces the notion of carnival as an avenue to break down hierarchical barriers and power inequities. Rather than applying rules to situations, Bakhtin’s approach to carnival suggests ways of viewing alternatives to power hierarchies. For example, Bakhtin (1984) states:

Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life. (p. 123)

Thus, in a school sense, power structures, hierarchies, and titles are suspended. He states, “one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 10). The notion of carnival provides school leaders with an option to suspend power so true dialogic relations may occur. Sidorkin (1999) supports the notion of carnival and agrees with Bakhtin that dialogue can be created, which takes a different stance than Buber who believes that dialogue arises spontaneously. In this idea, carnival is a “care free world” which is free of worry and commitment (p. 135). This suspension of hierarchical structures is important because such
hierarchy and power structures place constraints on individuals “that result in some people being marginalized while others are accepted, some being included and others excluded, some being oppressed and others privileged, some voices being heard and others silenced” (Shields, 2007, p. 101).

From an ontological perspective, the notion of carnival is important because it gives us freedom from constraints of rules. Sidorkin (1999) stresses the importance of carnival when he states, “Carnival is the mechanism that creates the possibility for the genuine dialogue to happen. It may not guarantee it, but it can occasion dialogical meetings by creating an appropriate time and space” (p. 136). And, in a school setting, carnival is important, occurs in brief moments, and can be difficult to observe. Yet, Sidorkin suggests, “there is some evidence that every good school engages in some form of carnival” (p. 138) and “the whole school organization, its culture and activities, exists for these brief moments of dialogical relations through which every kid is given an opportunity to live” (p. 139). Thus, for Sidorkin, an ideal school world holds a balance between traditions and rules, and a life of carnival, where moments of laughter exist and rules are suspended. Finally, Sidorkin directly links carnival to the notion of dialogue in schools and asserts, “If one takes seriously a proposition that dialogue is at the center of human existence, then carnival should be at the center of attention of school organization” (p. 140).

If carnival should be at the center of school organization, as Sidorkin suggests, school leaders must challenge power structures and hierarchies in schools, and all stakeholders’ voices must be heard. Ryan (2006) suggests, “At its best, dialogue encourages the inclusion of voices not normally heard” (p. 122). He provides suggestions for school leaders and suggests dominant individuals, or those in power, abandon their influence when participating in dialogic settings. However, he cautions:
It would be naïve to think that dialogue in itself, however, can ensure that the marginalized will overturn the entrenched power relationships that exclude them from many of the advantages that others enjoy. Relationships among classed, raced, and gendered students, educators, and parents are difficult to overcome in the classroom and the school. (p. 122)

In other words, educators should be aware that challenges exist when power imbalances are prevalent in school systems, but they should also promote and encourage dialogue to suppress such barriers. On the other hand, some scholars, like Burbules (1993) suggest authority has “legitimacy” and that “a dialogical relation should be aimed toward making authority superfluous; but authority, properly conceived and sensitively exercised, can be a helpful element in attaining that end” (p. 35).

Inclusive school leaders strive to diminish power imbalance while creating inclusive practices in school settings. Shields (2009) acknowledges such barriers and issues of power and calls upon educators to “engage in dialogue that promotes understanding of the ways in which [power issues] create barriers to equal democratic citizenship” (p. 95). As a result, leaders must understand the power imbalances prevalent in school systems and use a dialogic framework to create communities of difference in inclusive schools. The next section of the literature review provides a framework of such dialogical relations to connect inclusive leadership, community, and dialogue.

**Theoretical Framework for Dialogue in Inclusive Schools**

The theoretical framework of Shields and Edwards’ (2005) dialogic relation theory provides a framework for understanding the relationship between inclusive school community and dialogue, and creates the foundational work of this study. Using Starratt’s notion of “absolute regard,” or not treating each other as objects, but based on their worth as human beings, Shields and Edwards (2005) posit three primary dimensions of relation, understanding,
and ontology in their theory, with relationships and understanding being ontological, and dialogue being placed at the center of the framework. These dimensions and will be discussed in detail to create the groundwork for the theoretical perspective and link to leaders creating inclusive schools.

The theory of dialogic relations stems from the current educational system’s lack of focus on equitable, socially just, deeply democratic schools. By using a multidimensional approach to dialogue, Shields and Edwards suggest the framework “can provide both an anchor and focus for a new approach to educational leadership” (p. 4). They state:

For us, dialogue is not just another word for “talk,” but a way of being in relation to other, often different, ideas, cultures, perspectives, and yes, people. It is a complex and powerful dynamic, one that whirls and spirals and evolves—one that is central to our emotional, social, and cognitive being, but that may begin with the simplest of human interactions. (p. 4)

Thus, the framework provides a comprehensive view into the realm of dialogue and its connection to how school leaders may use dialogue to enhance inclusive schools.

**Dialogue as Ontological**

The dialogical framework is centered on the premise that dialogue is central to our being, or in other words, it is ontological. For Bakhtin (1984), dialogue is ontological in the sense that it is a way of life in which one is open to others who might be different than oneself. He suggests, “To live means to participate in dialogue” (p. 293). For dialogue to be a way of life, remaining open to others and to outside perspectives is critical for school leaders. Similarly, Shields and Edwards (2005) state, “We believe that dialogue, like relationship and understanding, is fundamental to a fulfilling life; it requires and facilitates lifelong learning, constant openness to others, and continual growth and change on the part of individuals and ultimately the organizations of which they are a part” (p. 160). Thus, dialogue is a way to engage all members
of a community. Within a school context, understanding dialogue as ontological, or as a way of life, is a critical foundation for the next components of relationships and understanding.

**Dialogue as Relationship**

Bureaucratic, routinized school systems challenge school leaders to focus on testing processes and structures, consequently diminishing, or eliminating relationships in the organization. In order for schools to be inclusive communities of difference, dialogic relationships are essential. Burbules (1993) argues, “Dialogue is not fundamentally a specific communicative form of question and response, but at heart a kind of social relation that engages its participants” (p. 19). Similarly, Shields and Edwards (2005) support that notion and suggest that “dialogue transcends language; it permits a direct relation between individuals” (p. 60). Thus, school leadership efforts must recognize the relationship and ontology of dialogue in the school setting.

Relational ontology and education are not synonymous terms; however, school leaders cannot build inclusive schools without acknowledging the importance of relationships in their daily work. Therefore, the next dimension of the theoretical framework is dialogic relation, or relationship as dialogue. Shields and Edwards (2005) make a point to connect relationships and ontology when they state, “We need to make it clear from the outset. When we say that relationships are ontological, we are saying that they are a fundamental and intrinsic part of being, that we cannot separate our existence from our relationships” (p. 44). Additionally, they define dialogic relations as “complex and multifaceted” with three central ideas: “an I-Thou stance, certain space or distance between self and other, and most importantly, it begins, not with self, but with other” (p. 51). Through this I-Thou stance, Buber (1970) argues that individuals engage in dialogue involving each other’s whole being and thus, invite reciprocity. He states,
“relation is reciprocity” (p. 67). Freire (2000a) also speaks to the “I-Thou” stance and says, “Dialogue is an I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two Subjects” (p. 89).

Therefore, dialogic relationships grow, change, and learn through the process of dialogue. For example, Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest:

> When we get beyond ourselves, beyond the maxim of the Golden Rule, we become aware that we cannot impose any attitudes, even ones of acceptance or openness or tolerance toward others. We can only bring to our interaction with another person absolute regard, without preconceived solutions for “their problems.” When another person meets my openness with his or her own, a dialogic relation begins. (p. 56)

In other words, dialogic relation is not a unilateral, or one-sided viewpoint. The “openness” from one to another is critical to the dialogic relation process.

**Dialogue as Understanding**

School leaders must engage in the process of understanding, and dialogic relationships are closely connected to the notion of understanding. Gadamer (2004) suggests that understanding is critical to human existence, thus strengthening the importance of relationships, dialogue, and understanding. He states, “To understand is to participate immediately in life, without any mediation through concepts” (p. 208). This “participation in life” of which Gadamer speaks, links the notion of relationships to the concept of understanding. Thus, in order to understand, one must be open, situated, committed, and willing to question. Being open to others is not a simple task. Gadamer (2004) suggests understanding through the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle asks one to read the parts to understand the whole; however, one cannot understand the whole until the parts are read. For school leaders, the circle is relevant as it expects us to remain open and consider and reconsider the meanings between individuals to gain better understanding of what one is communicating.
School leaders bring their own preconceived notions and understandings to their school settings. To be present, or to be situated, one must be conscious; we cannot remove ourselves from “the moment of encounter with another” (Shields & Edwards, 2005). Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, coupled with Gadamer’s concept of situatedness provide a framework for understanding. “Habitus . . . comprises fields such as education . . . each with its own specific internal laws of logic, its own traditions and assumptions that help to shape our ‘prejudices’” (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 72). Similarly, Gadamer (2004) suggests that one is always inside of a situation, not outside of it. He writes, “The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. . . . We always find ourselves within a situation” (p. 301). Thus, school leaders live within situations and bring their own situations and prejudices to the school setting; leaders cannot remove themselves from understanding. Instead, they must be open and understand the other.

Given that diversity exists in people’s situations, experiences and backgrounds, potential barriers do exist. As Burbules and Bruce (2001) suggest:

Dialogue creates an opportunity for some to learn from and with others. Such diversity, however, does not only create a set of possibilities and opportunities; it also constitutes a potential barrier—for it is these very same differences that can lead to misunderstandings, disagreements, or speaking at cross purposes. (p. 1112)

While openness to another is critical to understanding, asking authentic questions of another brings meaning and understanding to dialogic relations as well. For inclusive school leaders, authentic questioning promotes understanding. Shields and Edwards support that idea and state, “A genuine question provides the other an opportunity to explore his or her own world, as revealed by the unique limits of the question, and reveal this world to the questioner in terms the questioner has put and may therefore understand” (p. 78). Thus, school leaders may ask
questions to deepen their understanding, while being conscious of their own prejudices and situated-selves that they bring to school settings.

**Dialogic Relations, Inclusive Leadership, and Community**

The theoretical framework for this study built upon Shields and Edwards (2005) notion of dialogical relationships. In order to link create the framework for the study, it was critical to pull these notions together. This framework, shown in Figure 1, centered on dialogue, and included these five components: inclusive leadership, community, ontology, understanding, and relationships. It provided the framework for understanding how principals create an inclusive school community. A concept of dialogue constituted the theoretical framework for this study and guided the methodology, including the interview questions and protocol, and comprised a preliminary analytical framework for looking at the data.

![Figure 1. Theoretical framework.](image)

The theoretical framework linked the ideas of inclusive leadership, community, and dialogue to view school leadership from a different perspective. School leaders, focused on
social justice, equity, and access, treat all members of the school community with absolute regard. School leaders, when focused on the components of inclusive leadership, can build a sense of community, or a community of difference, in order to create spaces to have meaningful dialogue. By viewing dialogue from an ontological perspective, school leaders live dialogue in their schools to lead inclusive school communities.

**Conclusion: Linking Dialogic Relationships and Educational Practice**

Traditional models of schools leave school leaders perpetuating routine, hierarchical structures and processes in schools. Furthermore, state and federal mandates have silenced the voices of students from minority and low-income backgrounds as schools strive to meet adequate yearly progress demands through centralized, drill and kill curricula. Dialogic leadership is a critical, yet missing component to creating inclusive school communities.

The literature suggests that school leaders must openly engage in dialogue in order to provide inclusive school communities. Through this literature review, the notion of inclusive leadership has been explored to provide an explanation of the challenges and barriers that school leaders face in creating inclusive schools. By examining inclusive leadership, a focus on community through the understanding of a community of difference emerged. By examining the literature on inclusive leadership and community, the literature built to a foundation of dialogue, and explored the theoretical framework of dialogic relations and its connection to inclusive leadership and community. Thus, a theoretical framework was created for the study and focused on the components of inclusive leadership, community, understanding, relationships, and ontology—all focused on the central notion of dialogue to provide a foundation for the study. Shields and Edwards (2005) framework reminds us, “Educational leadership works best when it
is firmly grounded in dialogue, on an understanding of its ontological qualities that are inherently relational and that focus on understanding, not prescription” (p. 170). In other words, inclusive school leadership must be grounded in dialogue as ontology, or rather, as a way of life.

The next chapter describes the methodology of the study and the procedures used to achieve its purpose, specifically: the research design, strategies of inquiry, the case description and participants, data collection procedures, data recording procedures, ethical considerations, and issues of trustworthiness.
Chapter 3
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand how principals use dialogue and the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools. This chapter describes the procedures used to achieve this purpose, specifically: the research design, strategies of inquiry, the case description and participants, data collection procedures, data recording procedures, ethical considerations, and issues of trustworthiness.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between dialogue and an inclusive school community?
2. What is the principal’s conception of an inclusive community?
3. What is the role of dialogue in creating an inclusive community?
4. What challenges does a principal face when trying to create an inclusive community and how may they be overcome?

Research Design

Research design in qualitative studies differs from a quantitative approach and involves different strategies of inquiry, methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2009). Nevertheless, as Agresti and Finlay (1997) suggest, “Information gathering is at the heart of all sciences” (p. 2). To further that point, Miles and Huberman (1984) state, “We need to make explicit the procedures and thought processes that qualitative researchers actually use in their work” (p. 22). The two most common forms of research design include the qualitative and quantitative approach, but each has many different strategies and components.

While both forms of research design collect data for specific purposes, qualitative and quantitative research differ. Qualitative research relies on “text and image data, [has] unique
steps in data analysis, and [draws] on diverse strategies of inquiry” (Creswell, 2009, p. 173), while quantitative research tests theories by examining relationships and focuses on experimental and non-experimental designs (Creswell, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as a “situated activity” where “researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena” (p. 3). Similarly, Creswell (2009) explains, “The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information” (p. 176). Based on the research design components of natural settings, interpreting phenomena, and learning from participants, the qualitative method provided the greatest research design benefit to this particular study.

Strategy of Inquiry

A case study approach identifies the approach to inquiry being used, provides background about the strategy of inquiry, discusses why case study is an appropriate strategy, and explores the research problem in detail. According to Creswell (2009), “Case studies are a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p. 13). Furthermore, case studies are time-bound and use a variety of data collection procedures (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003).

Creswell (2007) defines case study research as:

A qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 73)

Merriam (2009) argues that the case study is “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40), while Yin (2008) suggests that “a case study is an empirical inquiry” (p. 18). Merriam and Yin’s ideas are pertinent to the components of this study. I used an in-depth
analysis of a bounded system, a school, to examine the relationship between dialogue and an inclusive school.

Given that I wanted to examine the relationships between dialogue and inclusive schools, I conducted a multiple case study to explore three bounded systems (schools) over time and collected detailed data through multiple sources of information. By studying a collection of schools identified as “inclusive school communities,” I could better understand how inclusive communities were created.

On the other hand, some researchers caution against a multiple case design and suggest that studying multiple cases “dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases an individual studies, the less the depth in any single case” (Merriam, 2009). However, Stake (2006) argues that the single case study design is still meaningful and states, “In multi-case study research, the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases” (p. 4). Therefore, I studied three schools identified as inclusive schools to gain insight into each individual school through separate case reports, which provided a better understanding of the collective concept “inclusive schools.”

**Site Selection and Participants**

The strategy of reputational approach was used to identify research sites. Using a reputational approach, I started by contacting two superintendents of large elementary school districts and two university professors who were positioned to identify inclusive schools. The reputational approach involved requesting a group of “knowledgeable” (also known as experts, raters, informants, or judges), representative of the community, to identify local leaders (Abu-Laban, 1965).
The reputational approach has advantages and disadvantages. For instance, disadvantages of the method include the possibility of missing key leaders through the identification process and also the method assumes that those who are identified are indeed knowledgeable about the research topic (Brennan, 2006), although for the purposes of this study I sought exemplars in the field and did not search for a comprehensive list of inclusive schools. Thus, the strengths of the reputational approach outweighed the limitations. For example, the reputational approach allowed me to obtain a list of principals through the panel of identified “experts.” Through this list, I purposefully selected schools based on specific criterion related to inclusive learning communities.

Information provided by the superintendents and university professors generated a list of principals and schools. From that point, I informed the principals by sending a letter to notify them that they were identified to be a leader of an inclusive school; I introduced myself and the purpose of the study. Next, I contacted each of the principals directly to conduct an initial phone screening where I asked questions about inclusive school communities. Based on the participants’ responses to the phone screen, I selected principals for the study. In other words, principals’ responses to a set of questions were considered for participant selection. Screening questions included:

1. What is your greatest challenge in creating an inclusive school, and how do you overcome it?
2. What does the term “inclusive school community” mean to you?

By asking these questions, I was looking to gauge whether or not principals associated the term “inclusive school” with students with disabilities, special education, or professional learning communities, or if they instead provided specific examples about aspects of social justice, equity, access, and dialogue.
Additionally, I sought principals who provided specific examples of ways in which they provided spaces for dialogue in their schools, accompanied with specific examples of how dialogue had created opportunities for students who were traditionally underserved in the school setting. Finally, I sought principals who could express specific examples of barriers to dialogue in schools and ways in which they had overcome such barriers.

Purposeful participant selection is a critical element in a study’s research design. According to Creswell (2009), “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 178). From the list obtained from the expert panel interviews, I purposefully selected three principals of increasingly diverse schools with the following characteristics: a minimum of 25% minoritized and/or free and reduced price lunch students, high levels of student achievement based on state standardized tests, and responses to an initial phone interview that indicated they were leading an inclusive school. Therefore, criteria for selecting schools were based on minority and low-income population, student achievement, and principals’ conceptions of inclusive school communities.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection involves identifying the setting, the types of data to be collected, and the protocol for recording the data. In this study, data were collected through the following qualitative processes: interviews, surveys, observations, field notes, journals, and student focus group feedback. Utilizing Creswell’s (2009) term as “researcher as key instrument,” I collected and gathered the multiple sources of data for the study. Prior to the interview and survey process, applications for clearance from the Institutional Review Board of the university, as well as the
school districts were completed and approved in order to meet the requirements of the human subject study. Additional ethical considerations are discussed at the end of this section.

Identified principals were interviewed on two to three separate occurrences through a semi-structured interview protocol. Principals were interviewed two to three times over a three to five month time frame. In addition, one to two site visits were conducted when principals were interviewed to gain observational data through staff meetings and team meetings. Approximately 20-30 teachers within each school were surveyed as well to provide a comparison of the principals’ conception to the teachers’ conception of what constituted an inclusive community. Finally, one student focus group comprised of three to five students was arranged at each school to gain insight into students’ perspectives of whether and how their principal had created an inclusive learning community based on the themes from the five-dimensional theoretical framework of inclusive leadership, community, relationships, ontology, and understanding.

Interviewing was a key data collection procedure in this research study and occurred in the natural setting of the participants. As Merriam (2009) suggests, “Interviewing is . . . the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies” (p. 88). In this study, I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews of three principals at their own school sites. A semi-structured interview is more open-ended and less structured (Merriam, 2009).

Strengths and limitations exist for conducting interviews. Creswell (2009) suggests that interviews allow the researcher to gain insight into historical perspectives and allows the researcher to have control over the interview questions. However, interviews have limitations as well. Interview answers can be biased because of the presence of the researcher. Similarly, not all people are articulate and perceptive during an interview process (Creswell, 2009). Nevertheless, Merriam (2009) asserts, “Interviewing is often the major source of the qualitative
data needed for understanding the phenomenon under study” (p. 114). Furthermore, interviews are limited by self-censoring and self-perceptions.

In addition to interviews of principals, student focus groups were conducted to provide insight into how students’ viewed their principals’ work in creating inclusive schools. Data from a focus group involve a social construction of knowledge (Merriam, 2009). To support that notion, Patton (2002) states:

Unlike a series of one-on-one interviews, in a focus group participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. . . . The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others. (p. 386)

In this study, a focus group setting for students provided an opportunity for students to share their experiences at school with a group of their peers. A limitation of this particular data collection process could have been that students did not openly speak during the focus group session; however, it was observed that the focus group format allowed students to openly share their own feelings and sense of inclusion relative to an inclusive learning community.

Site observations were completed as a data collection procedure. I observed team meetings to obtain data on inclusive schools. By gathering data from site observations, I was able to see the connections and gaps between the interview, survey, and focus group feedback as it related to the five-dimensional theoretical framework of the study. I gained access to the meetings by obtaining consent from the principal and respective members of the meetings. Team meetings were observed once at each respective school and lasted approximately one hour in length.

Qualitative observations present various strengths. For example, as an outside observer, I was able to notice things in the school that have become routine to those inside of the school (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, observations allowed me to triangulate my data in conjunction
with interviews and survey data. A final strength of including observations allowed me to see what may not be told during an interview because participants might not feel comfortable to discuss certain topics. While strengths are evident, critics argue that observations are subjective and therefore unreliable; however, as Merriam (2009) states, “Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the topic under study” (p. 119).

Data Recording Procedures

For data recording procedures, I used an observational and interview protocol to record data throughout the research process. During the observations, I included the setting, date, time of the observation. In addition, I used an interview protocol to record interviews. I recorded the interviews by tape-recording them with a computer and a hand-held recorder and used open-ended probes for follow-up questions. During interviews, I took notes on paper in case the audio equipment failed.

Ethical Considerations

As with any study, ethical considerations must be considered in order to protect the participants of the study, develop trust with participants, and promote integrity of the research. Creswell (2009) states, “Many ethical issues arise during this [data collection] stage of the research” (p. 89).

In order to address ethical concerns, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the university reviewed and approved this research plan. Additionally, I considered the special needs of vulnerable populations, specifically students. My research proposal addressed students’ risks
in participating in the study. Furthermore, I developed an informed consent form for participants to sign before they engage in any part of the study. Finally, gaining access to research sites was an area of ethical consideration. I wrote a letter indicating the length of time that I would conduct the research, the potential impact of the research, and outcomes (Creswell, 2009).

Other ethical considerations were evident. As an example, all principals asked how they were identified for the study. I explained the reputational approach used to determine school and principal selection, and I also shared that principals were selected by an expert panel of superintendents and university professors. Additionally, each principal asked the purpose of the study. Prior to conducting the interviews with principals, and prior to conducting the teacher survey and student focus group, I shared the purpose of the study with each participant.

A final ethical consideration was the possibility that certain themes—like dialogue—would be missing from the data collection. If certain elements were missing, I included those missing elements in the data analysis portion of the study and provided possible implications for the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Stages of data analysis are interrelated. Krathwohl (1998) states, “qualitative researchers are judged by how insightfully they analyze their data, how well they present their interpretations, and how carefully and tightly they relate them to their information base” (p. 23). Merriam (2009) states, “Conveying an understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data” (p. 203). Creswell (2009) suggests that data analysis is interactive and can occur through the data collection process and states, “qualitative data analysis is conducted concurrently with gathering data, making interpretations, and writing reports” (p. 184). As
previously stated, this research involved a multiple case study approach, which involved collecting data from more than one source.

Two stages of analysis, within case and cross-case, occurred. The within-case analysis treated each case individually, while the cross-case analyzed the data across cases. Merriam (2009) supports that notion and explains, “A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build abstractions across cases” (p. 204). Similarly, Patton (2002) suggests, “the first task to do a careful job independently writing up the separate cases. Once that is done, cross-case analysis can begin in search of patterns and themes” (p. 57). In other words, I analyzed each case individually, and I cross-analyzed themes and patterns across all cases studied. Additionally, I reviewed the tapes and transcribed the first interview by hand in order to gain a sense as to whether or not I was receiving feedback and information that was appropriate to my study.

Once I had collected all of the data from my interviews, I read all of the transcripts to get a sense of the whole picture of the data. As I read, I took notes of ideas that came to mind. My next step in the detailed analysis process included coding the data. “[Coding] involves taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often a term based in the actual language of the participant” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). I included common codes found in the literature, unusual codes, and codes which were surprising. As an example, as principals consistently mentioned the notion of parental involvement in their interviews, a section on parental involvement was created as a code. However, only one participant mentioned the need for trust when creating an inclusive community, so I coded that as an unusual and unique code that was not mentioned by all participants, but one that was still relevant to the study. I utilized categories from the literature review in coding which included dialogue as the central focus and
also included the components of the five dimensional framework: inclusive leadership, community, understanding, ontology, and relationships.

Additional codes were allowed to emerge during data analysis. To support that notion, Creswell (2009) explains, “The traditional approach in the social sciences is to allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis” (p. 187). However, a large majority of the codes came from the theoretical framework and included the five-dimensions surrounding dialogue. Using inductive data analysis, I looked for themes, patterns, and categories that emerged from the collected data. According to Creswell (2009), “Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organizing data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (p. 175). In order to organize the data together, I constructed a case record (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2008) which allowed me to locate specific data during analysis.

The final step in the analysis phase included an interpretation. I included an interpretation from my own perspective as a researcher; however, I also included the perspective as it relates to the literature or theories established in the literature review.

**Ethical Considerations in Data Analysis and Interpretation**

While ethical considerations are evident in data collection procedures, consideration must also be given during data analysis and interpretation. For example, it was a possibility that identified schools did not necessarily possess aspects of an inclusive school as identified by the literature. If that was to occur, in order to maintain the ethical expectations of the study, I reported those findings in my study. Furthermore, in order to maintain anonymity of participants, I provided pseudonyms to protect their identity throughout the research process. Additionally, I
will keep the data for 7 years. Creswell (2009) recommends, “Data, once analyzed, need to be kept for a reasonable period of time (e.g., Sieber, 1998, recommends 5-10 years)” (p. 91). Data will be destroyed after the 7 year time frame.

It is important to be accurate during the interpretation phase of the research study. In order to strengthen accuracy, I used various validation strategies including triangulation and thick description, and I presented any discrepant information that ran counter to the themes of the findings (Creswell, 2009). These strategies are discussed in detail in the next section.

**Trustworthiness**

Ethical considerations and issues should be addressed in studies (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (2009) connects validity, credibility, and ethical issues and suggests, “part of ensuring for the trustworthiness of a study—its credibility—is that the researcher himself or herself is trustworthy in carrying out the study in as ethical a manner as possible” (p. 234). Abrami, Cholmsky, and Gordon (2001) suggest that “ethical guidelines help insure that researchers respect the rights and dignity of every research participant” (p. 17). When conducting a study, a researcher must utilize certain procedures to check for accuracy and to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2009). To support that notion, Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) suggest, “using more than one type of analysis can strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings” (p. 575).

Clear distinctions exist between quantitative and qualitative uses of validity. As an example, quantitative research limits itself to what is measurable or quantifiable, whereas qualitative research tends to focus on the personal, social, and descriptive aspects of the world. Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest parallel categories to meet traditional standards of inquiry.
However, they move beyond the traditional standard to suggest if we really think qualitative research is important and valuable then it should have its own standards of trustworthiness. Such criteria of trustworthiness, a parallel to the term rigor, include triangulation, or cross checking, of data, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checking.

For the purposes of this study, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were used. Triangulation and member checking obtain the standards which are authenticity and credibility. According to Merriam, “Probably the most well known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study is what is known as triangulation” (p. 215). Creswell (2009) supports the idea that triangulation is the most frequently used validity strategy and suggests if themes emerge from several sources of data then triangulation adds to the validity of a study. In this study, I triangulated the data by using multiple forms of data including interviews, surveys, observations, and focus groups to gather data, which increased the trustworthiness of the study.

Member checking was the next validity measure that was used in the research. I took the final themes back to the participants through a follow-up interview and often asked follow-up questions to ensure that I had correctly interpreted the transcripts. A noted strength of validity, Maxwell (2005) states, “This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do” (p. 111). Member checking involves a review of the final report or themes; however, Creswell (2009) cautions, “this does not mean taking back the raw transcripts to check for accuracy” (p. 191). A limitation, or concern, with member checking includes the possibility that the participant disagrees with the report or wants to change the information given in the initial interview; however, the strengths of member checking outweigh the limitations.
While these trustworthiness criteria provide a foundation for extending a positivist perspective, there are some limitations which still exist. For example, the criteria originate from a positivist construction (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). A positivist construction is objective and does not take into consideration conflict, social aspects, or varied value structures in society. To address these limitations, Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest authenticity criteria of fairness, ontological authentication, educative authentication, catalytic authentication, and tactical authenticity. “Authenticity criteria are part of an inductive, grounded, and creative process that springs from immersion with naturalistic ontology, epistemology, and methodology” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 24). Schwandt (2007) suggests that these authenticity criteria ask us to think more carefully about “judging the credibility of interpretations in both our everyday lives and our professional lives as interpreters of human actions” (p. 14). Schwandt describes the authenticity criteria as:

The naturalistic posture that involves all stakeholders from the start, the honors their inputs, that provides them with decision-making power in guiding the evaluation, that attempts to empower the powerless and give voice to the speechless, and that results in a collaborative effort holds more promise for eliminating such hoary distinctions as basic versus applied and theory versus practice. (p. 24)

For the purposes of this study, I was trying to lead into Lincoln and Guba’s notion of catalytic authentication. Catalytic authentication refers to the ability of the inquiry process to stimulate action. Given that I focused on marginalization in school settings and analyzed whether or not there is a relationship between dialogue and inclusivity as a result of principals using dialogue to create inclusive schools which promote and expect equitable practices such as including marginalized groups into decision-making processes, it made sense to use Lincoln and Guba’s authenticity criteria of catalytic authentication for my study.

Marshall (1985) discusses the notion of “goodness” in qualitative research and suggests the need for two strands of qualitative research. She suggests that researchers must determine
which strand best fits with their research goals. One strand tests hypotheses; the other strand explores for meaning. Marshall’s criteria of “goodness” includes: discovers problem through personal curiosity; views researcher as a research instrument; uses cross-cultural perspectives; maintains the stance of the researcher; research is ethical; appropriate match between information and modes of gathering data; includes original data; ties analysis to the big picture (Marshall, 1985, p. 357).

For the purposes of this study, Marshall’s “exploration-for-meaning” strand was most appropriate because it allowed the researcher to challenge the existing positivist paradigm. As an example, the exploration-for-meaning strand asks researchers to examine systems of power in educational systems and the connections between economic and political structures within those systems, exclusion of certain subgroups from organizations, and the process of meaning and decision-making, including a focus on how people can be excluded from the process itself (Marshall, 1985). These elements directly relate to my study as I examined aspects of power structures, exclusionary practices for marginalized students, and inclusion of parents and students in dialogue and decision-making processes.

Marshall cautions against researchers searching for trustworthiness which can undermine the “goodness” of qualitative research. For example, while data is important to the research process, Marshall (1985) suggests that “the pressure to control and manage data may seriously undermine the value of qualitative research” (p. 358). As an example, charts, data, and graphs play a role in qualitative analysis, but these items are used to check patterns which might emerge through the data itself. Marshall offers alternative approaches to trustworthiness for the exploration-for-meaning strand which preserves “goodness” of qualitative research. These suggestions include: accept that organizations are unique; be explicit about power and political
issues; qualitative studies “should be open to discovering sources of values of conflict to uncover the values assumptions that hinder the implementation of policies aimed at providing equity”; qualitative research benefits from “creative, intuitive insights of human researchers” (p. 369).

**Transferability in Qualitative Studies**

Often the term generalizability is used for both qualitative and quantitative studies, but many researchers say that it is not appropriate for qualitative studies and that the term transferability is more appropriate. Transferability refers to the extent to which the results of the study can apply to new settings, people, or samples. In other words, researchers refer to whether or not the findings of the study will “hold up” beyond the participants and setting (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007, p. 36).

For transferability purposes, thick, descriptive data were used. Detailed descriptions, or what Geertz (1973) would call rich, thick description, of the participants, setting, and interviews provide realistic, rich experiences to increase validity (Creswell, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (2000) explain thick, descriptive data for transferability purposes and define it as “narrative developed about the context so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere” (p. 19). I included thick description obtained from interviews to support the findings of the study and provided a link back to the research problem and purpose.

**Summary**

Case study inquiry was the qualitative methodology used in this study. Through a reputational approach, inclusive school communities were identified. Data collection procedures
included interviews, observations, surveys, and student focus group data. A multiple case study of three principals from identified schools were interviewed, along with surveys of staff members and focus groups of students. A semi-structured interview protocol was used consistently throughout the data collection procedure.

Data analysis procedures consisted of coding the data, aggregating them, and clustering into themes based on the five-dimensional framework from the literature review. Emerging categories from the data collection and analysis led me to construct findings, conclusions, and recommendations in Chapter 6.

In the next chapter, the results of the study are presented. Chapter 4 includes interview information collected, observation data gathered, and document analysis information.
Chapter 4

Inclusive Schools and Dialogue

Dialogue is lacking in today’s schools (Ryan, 2006; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Shields, 2009). This chapter examines the findings of this study related to the relationships between dialogue and inclusive school communities. Thus, this chapter provides an overview of the case study and participants. To ensure confidentiality, both the site and participants have been described in terms designed to not disclose personally identifiable information, and pseudonyms have been given to the schools and participants.

I first examine Kingsworth Middle School to see how the principal creates an inclusive school. I then examine an elementary school, Central Elementary School, to see how the principal uses dialogue in his daily work to create an inclusive school. In the third part of the chapter I turn to another elementary school, Pride Elementary School to examine how a principal of a high minority and high low-income school uses dialogue to create an inclusive school. Table 1 provides an overview of each case.

Table 1

Overview of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Site and grade level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yrs. as principal @ site</th>
<th>Total yrs. experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Kingsworth Middle School (7-8)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Central Elementary School (K-5)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Pride Elementary School (1-4)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The primary focus of this study was to understand the relationship between dialogue and inclusive school communities. In order to do so, principals were studied, and the data within this chapter will address the following research questions:
1. What is the relationship between dialogue and an inclusive school community?
2. What is the principal’s conception of an inclusive community?
3. What is the role of dialogue in creating an inclusive community?
4. What challenges does a principal face when trying to create an inclusive community and how may they be overcome?

The data are gathered from a variety of sources and represented in Table 2.

Table 2

Data Collection Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Total # of teachers surveyed</th>
<th>Total # of teachers who took survey</th>
<th># of students in focus group</th>
<th># of principal interviews</th>
<th>Documents analyzed</th>
<th># of observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kingsworth</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Utilizing direct quotes from participant interviews, observation summaries, teacher survey results, student focus group feedback, and evidence from several artifacts, the findings summarize each principal’s story of their journey of dialogic relations in hopes of creating an inclusive community. After all three schools have been discussed separately, I then provide a cross-case analysis of common and emerging themes and patterns.

**Kingsworth Middle School: Struggling to Make it Happen**

*I want kids to know when they walk in, yeah, things are tough at home, but when they walk in here I want them to think and have that mindset that this is a place to learn, it’s here for them. And it’s theirs. (Alan Jacobs, Kingsworth Jr. High School Principal)*

**School Overview**

Kingsworth Jr. High School sits on the outskirts of a large city in the Midwest. Although the town is not in the city, it is considered to be one of the largest urban school districts in the
state. Spanning over 48 square miles, the district houses 13 schools and approximately 5,500 students.

Kingsworth is the only middle school in the district, serving grades 7 and 8 and approximately 700 students. According to the 2010 school report card, Kingsworth has a 21% mobility rate, a 5% chronic truancy rate, a 91% attendance rate, and 90% parental contact, as reported on the state’s report card. An overview of the school’s demographics is listed below.

- Enrollment: 697
- White: 20%
- Black: 54%
- Hispanic: 22%
- Asian: 1%
- Multiracial: 3%
- Mobility: 21%
- Low-income: 85%

Along with many other schools in the district, Kingsworth struggles academically. As previously stated, schools are expected to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets each year as measured by the state’s standardized testing assessment. In the year 2010, schools were expected to meet an AYP target of 77.5%, meaning that 77.5% of students at each school must meet or exceed the state standards or else they are considered failing. While Kingsworth’s state standardized achievement scores have improved 30 percentage points over an 8-year span, growing from 37% of students meeting and exceeding the state standard to 67% meeting and exceeding the state standard, the school remains on the state’s Academic Watch Status (AWS) because they have yet to meet the state’s AYP target, which continues to increase every year. Academic watch schools are defined as “schools which failed to make AYP for two additional years after being placed on Academic Early Warning Status (AEWS).” Consequently, while the school has made academic gains over the years, students leaving Kingsworth will matriculate
into the district’s only high school, where only 21% of students are meeting or exceeding the state’s standard of achievement.

Utilizing three principal interviews, one teacher survey, one student focus group, an observation of a team meeting, and evidence from artifacts, this story describes Alan Jacobs’ journey of creating an inclusive school environment.

**Principal Background**

Alan Jacobs, a Caucasian male, grew up in a diverse community on the outskirts of a large Midwestern city. As a student, he “hated school,” struggled with reading, and had challenges staying attentive in class. Despite of, or because of those challenges, he believed that he had a calling to educate children. Thus, Alan began his teaching career 15 years ago as a social science teacher. From there, his principal inspired him to take on more endorsements to make him more marketable, including both a science and special education endorsement. He worked as a Dean of Students at a high school and then made the move to his current district. First, he worked at the high school as a Dean of Students and “everything started to click.” He “always noticed with [his] background, that the minority students, African American students especially, were always flocking to [him], especially if they had issues.” Although Alan is White, he knew that his previous district was not diverse, so when he came to his current district, where there is a large African American population, he felt like “he fit right in with the diverse kids within the district.” When Alan began his principalship at Kingsworth Middle School in the same district, he “just knew that those kids needed [him.]” Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, Alan spoke to his purpose, or calling, as the principal at Kingsworth when he stated, “It’s not about anything else but to give them [students] that hope.” It is that “hope” at the forefront of Alan’s journey to create an inclusive school at Kingsworth.
Alan attributed his connection to marginalized students to the experiences that he had as a teacher trying to “find his way” in education. One of Alan’s administrators had encouraged him to go into the field of special education. Through that experience in working with students with disabilities, Alan immediately felt a “connection” with students who struggle with learning. He shared that he also struggled with school and diagnosed himself with Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder. He spoke of “hating reading” and said that there was a long time that he himself hated school. Because of his personal struggles in school, he felt that he could “make a difference” and “connect” with students who struggled because of their academics or personal lives. Alan briefly shared he has a son with Down’s Syndrome. While he did not share too much detail about his son, the passion about education coupled with his personal experiences related to his own son’s needs were evident in Alan’s discussion about inclusive schools. He shared:

My journey really started with that special education experience, and then having a child with special needs. It just kind of opened my eyes to looking at every kid as an individual instead of to group them into some of the groupings that we put them in, like honors or gifted. . . . I think it was that experience that changed my perspective on education.

During Alan’s three years as principal, he has practiced his belief in a strong focus of building relationships. He reminisced about his own classroom management style and recollected that it was “very different from the people around me from the standpoint that the kids enjoyed coming to my class.” Yet, Alan was humble and did not want to say that he “inspires” because it “sounds conceited.” Instead, he suggested that he “tries to build a relationship with every kid, and that’s what has inspired me to give as many kids an experience that school is not an awful place to come and it is your ticket to the American Dream.” And, Alan expected that teachers in his building have that same focus. He posited, “I’ve been looking for a different type of person in this building. I’m looking for people to teach students to read. The student is first.”
Creating an Inclusive School

Alan Jacobs suggested that he strives to create an inclusive school. According to Alan, opportunity and access are at the core of understanding what an inclusive school means. Specifically, Alan spoke of the importance of providing equitable access to the curriculum for every student in his building. When asked to define what inclusive school means to him, Alan immediately focused on curriculum in schools as he responded, “Inclusive school simply means that every kid is getting the same opportunities. The curriculum is the same, and that’s very important. We’re not lowering our expectations . . . that is difficult for some teachers to grasp.” Alan continued to share that the teachers have a belief system that “some kids just can’t” when it comes to curricular expectations.

Alan also spoke about the importance of conversation when asked to define an inclusive school. As an example, he expressed the importance of critical conversations between himself and teachers when discussing access to curriculum. Specifically, he stated, “Everybody is going to get that equal representation of whatever we’re teaching here.” Alan expressed the need to “eliminate tracks” within the system and said that teachers struggle with that philosophy because many teachers still have a mindset that “those [marginalized] kids just can’t handle high levels.” In other words, Alan did not believe that students who struggle academically should be limited to lower-level classes, and yet, this representation of conversation did not represent the notion of dialogue in an ontological sense, although it did show Alan’s commitment to having critical conversations with his staff about inclusive practices.

Additionally, Alan defined an inclusive school as one that “breaks down the walls.” When asked to clarify a school that breaks down the walls, Alan stated:

*And now it’s time to break down the walls. And the walls are those that, you know, have seen principals come and go in this building who have seen every concept or belief that*
those principals bring fail or fall apart because the principal or administrator left. You know, it’s like the flavor of the month they [teachers] feel that they’re getting every time. And that is really the mindset that – that’s the area where I feel that I would give myself a C or maybe even an incomplete, simply because we’re still trying to break that down.

And when you hear all these things in the news about tenure and you watch some of these people that are in your building that are tenured, you know, there are some things that tenure – I guess there are positives about it, but what I’m seeing on a regular basis would go against that. Just because it’s very difficult to get some of the teachers to do the modifications and differentiation learning in the classroom. Teachers say, well, why do I need to do that? I’ve been doing this for years. And I say, yeah, well that was good for that group of students in 1987, but it’s not good for the group that’s here in 2011. And to be successful in our classroom, which I want you to be, to reach these kids, you’re gonna have to do these things. You can’t just come up with one lesson and hope to reach all the kids when in reality there’s a good chance that you’re only reaching the middle, which might be four kids in a group of 24.

Those are the conversations that have taken place this year. And you know, it’s made me popular with those tenured teachers that are on their seventh year who are sitting there going, man look at how much work I’ve done, and this person has basically is riding the old horse home or something, to retirement. And then the new teachers coming in, they feel that they’re being held to the same standards as those veteran teachers, which was not the mindset of this building prior to me coming in. And it’s been very difficult. You know, it’s just breaking down those walls.

According to Alan, these conversations are most likely to occur with teachers when they come into the office or when he is talking to them during evaluation conferences. He also talks about these topics during staff meetings and team meetings, but stated that it is difficult to find the time to have all of the conversations that need to happen. Thus, most of these conversations appear to be generated by Alan and occur sporadically when he can find the time to meet with teachers.

As Alan suggested, breaking down the walls can be a challenging task. Thus, this next section provides examples that Alan gave as challenges to creating an inclusive school.

**Challenges to Creating an Inclusive School**

Alan suggests that “change is difficult” when trying to create an inclusive school community. Alan was asked to rate himself as a principal so that I could better understand the challenges associated with his position and how he handled those barriers. When asked how
Alan rated his success as a principal, he responded, “Satisfactory is where I would put myself, simply because I have such high expectations, and I have no patience when it comes to myself. . . . I really want things to change overnight.” Yet, Alan suggested that creating an inclusive community is a challenging task and change takes time.

For Alan, one of the biggest challenges when trying to create an inclusive school revolves around changing the “mindset that every child has the ability to do great things.” In order to face that challenge, Alan stated that he uses a great deal of conversation with his teachers to try to change their mindset about the students they teach. He clarified that he is not just blaming teachers when he stated, “I’m blaming the whole learning environment.” One of Alan’s concerns derives from the idea that parents, who attended the same school when they were in middle school, and share negative experiences about school with their children. He shared how parents who had a negative school experience at Kingsworth do not support the school’s efforts in educating the students because of their own negative experiences at school. Alan did not blame the parents for their concerns about his school and claimed he wanted to challenge that historical philosophy and build relationships with those particular parents. However, Alan expressed the challenges associated with this barrier because many parents empathized with their children when their children expressed negative thoughts about school. Instead of supporting the learning environment, parents then shared their own negative experiences at the same building, which then reinforced students’ negative perceptions about their school experiences. For Alan, this creates a “stigma” surrounding the work that he is doing to created an inclusive school. To that end, Alan shared that he believes the mindset can be changed as he stated:

*It’s the self-prophecy, where whatever you say you can do, you’re going to do it. And I think the parents sometimes do that, as well as the teachers. And I think that’s really the biggest obstacle is to get everybody on the same page and say, you know what, we can change the way we think about this.*
And changing the mindset of what students can do is one of Alan’s biggest challenges when working with teachers, parents, and the students themselves. To change the mindset, Alan said that he uses conversation to address issues and bring new ideas to people, but Alan also mentioned that it is extremely difficult for him to find enough hours in the day to make time for these conversations. Thus, Alan appears to have an inclusive philosophy, but finds it difficult to use dialogic relationships to create an inclusive school.

While changing the mindset is a challenge, Alan also felt that safety, time constraints, and scheduling issues were additional barriers to creating an inclusive community. From a safety perspective, Alan suggested, “Safety was the first thing I addressed as a principal.” Alan recounted his first several years at Kingsworth where “fights were happening on a daily basis.” In order to address that concern, Alan discussed school safety concerns with his staff and students immediately. He stated that he had conversations with his staff and team about school safety and the importance of creating a safe environment to support an academic environment. He also mentioned the importance of the facilities and how they look for the students and community. He stated, “I want the kids to come here and feel safe, but also feel that this isn’t one of those schools where nobody cares about them and is all run-down.” As he spoke of taking pride in the facilities, he suggested, “This is a school where you take pride and looks like a school that people care about.” With the safety aspect, Alan believed that building relationships was a key component of safety. He greeted his students at the door each morning because he considered it “a safety mechanism.” According to Alan, he can identify any student who might look “a little bit off” so that he can have the conversation with them right away about their day off to a good start. Thus, Alan promoted these beliefs by having critical conversations with
students, parents, and teachers. However, these data suggest that Alan is beginning to create dialogic relations but that deeper understanding from the conversations is emerging slowly.

Alan believed that time constraints were a challenge when trying to create an inclusive school. As an example, Alan suggested that teachers and administrators have many expectations with state and federal mandates placed upon them. Because of these constraints, Alan suggested:

*By the end of the day, it's very difficult to have all of the conversations I need to have [with teachers, students, and parents]. I have a to-do list that I started last August, and I still have 5 items because I just kept adding. And I’m talking about the first 6 I put on there—there are 5 still on there because when the day gets going, I never know what is going to pop up.*

Thus, it is evident that dialogue was not occurring in the manner that Alan would like it to, and therefore, the environment was not promoting an inclusive environment school-wide.

And while Alan finds safety and time constraints challenging, he also suggested that scheduling was a barrier to creating an inclusive school. At Alan’s school, daily team meetings occur. Alan stated that he would like to attend more team meetings to speak to teachers about students, curriculum, and other pertinent information. He stated, “There are constraints with scheduling, I mean team meetings. I would like to go in and talk to the team today, but the team already has something else planned—they may have parents coming in. There are a lot of different things that play into that as a challenge.” Thus, Alan did not have dialogue with his staff on a regular basis and was not making dialogue a priority because of the challenges that he shared. The next section will discuss some of the strategies that Alan tried to use to combat these barriers.

**Strategies to Create an Inclusive School**

In order to create an inclusive environment, Alan suggested several strategies. The first strategy focused on building relationships. In a review of school data, Alan and his team noticed that male students were not performing as well as female students in academic or behavioral
data. Alan stated, “I understand there is a need for our male students to have a few more conversations with me, simply because you can look at our data . . . our boys are not living up to their [own] expectations.”

Alan believes that students should be continuously recognized for their leadership, and he made it a point to have dialogue with students about their accomplishments. As an example, I observed Alan to have conversations with students in the hallways about where they were planning to go to college and about their current classes and grades. He asked questions like, “How are your classes this year?” Additionally, during one observation, a male student’s voice was heard during our interview. Alan excused himself, and stated, “there was someone he needed to see” and quietly exited out a side door of his office. An African American male student was yelling and pounding on the doors in the hallway, and had happened to pound on Alan’s door. Alan stepped outside, called the student near him, and quietly asked how his day was going. Alan commented to the boy that he wanted him to have a good day and that he would be checking in on him later. Within a short time, the boy calmed down and went back to class. After the interaction, Alan said, “I didn’t see him and check in with him this morning because I was doing this interview. I knew he’d be off if I didn’t make contact with him, so that was his way of getting my attention and letting me know that I didn’t do what I usually do.” Similarly, during student focus groups, each male student who was present commented on how “Mr. Jacobs is constantly talking to us—in the hallways and in classrooms—about school and our goals.” These data would suggest that Alan is creating a shared understanding of dialogic relations with his students more than his teachers. As evidenced by these data, students suggest that Alan is having conversations with them to come to a deeper understanding of their needs and future goals.
While 85% of Kingsworth students are identified to come from low-income families, Alan did not see students and families from a low-income background as a challenge; instead, he viewed the challenge of education for all students as an opportunity. He spoke to understanding “norms that go into place” and said, “My teachers often still, even though we have conversations about it, still don’t understand why students can buy hundred dollar tennis shoes and they don’t have money for lunch.” Alan continues to have conversations with his staff to share with them that kids try to find happiness through material things and try to fit in to “throw off the stigma that they are poor.” He continued, “There is such a stigma on poor that you’ll hear students call each other poor and dirty if they are involved in some type of verbal altercation.” When Alan heard comments like this, he stated that he addressed them right away by pulling students into groups within his office to “air out the issues.” To do this, he said that he asked students to share their concerns with each other to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and economic sensitivities associated with students.

With that, Alan also made the connection of the notion of dialogue to the importance of parent communication when he stated, “I think you have to understand that with low-income families you often find parents who are strapped and sometimes impatient with their own children.” Alan shared that he has rarely raised his voice to a child and said:

You have to understand that they [students] get that. They get the yelling . . . screaming. And it’s usually because of financial reasons that they almost get to a point where they tune that out. And it’s when you talk softly and you talk to them as an individual is when you get their attention.

Through my observations at Alan’s school, I witnessed, on several occasions, that Alan used a soft, calm voice when speaking to students. On one observation day, a student was being walked out of the building in handcuffs. As I entered the office, three students were yelling in the main office as they were escorted to the office because they had been in a fight. Alan quickly, yet
quietly came out of his office, put his hand on one of the student’s shoulders, and asked the student to come in his office. She quickly complied. Then, Alan asked another to go with his assistant, and the third to sit with a counselor. Alan then realized that I was sitting in the office waiting for our appointment. He quietly walked over and said, “I’m sorry—I will be with you when I can.” And with that, the office was calm yet again.

Building relationships with students is a central focus for Alan, but he said that dialogue is at the heart of his practice. He spoke of conversations with students and how we “need to be real with them.” In one example, Alan shared a story of a Caucasian student telling him that it was “difficult to be White in a regular ed. class.” When Alan probed deeper, the student explained that the “African American students automatically come up with nicknames, and it’s not usually a good one. It’s usually looking at something negatively based upon either your look, your style, or your income level.” To address the situation, Alan used the notion of dialogue to better understand the perspectives of all parties involved and also for the students to better understand each other. He stated, “We talked about how we are all trying to make our lives better and have a life where we help each other and are successful at helping each other.” Alan also shared that he would facilitate a conversation between students to come to a deeper understanding of the root issues of poverty and race. Alan stated that he would share about his own experiences of growing up in a low-income neighborhood and would ask students to speak to each other about their home lives and how they felt about the comments that they heard said to them. These data suggest that Alan strives to create a deeper understanding between students, but these experiences are limited to a select group of students having an issue, which does not necessarily transfer into school-wide practice.
Conversations do not just occur between Alan and students, however. They also occur with parents. As an example, Alan talks about a time when a Hispanic female was dating an African American male and the Hispanic female’s father was upset. Alan described his conversation with the Hispanic father. “You have to look at the whole picture. Is he a good boy? Does he have good grades? Does he treat your daughter well? Has he ever broken any rules? You’ve got to look at every picture for every case.” Alan stated that it is his goal to ask the difficult questions to parents and students to come to a deeper understanding of what the root of the problem is for the specific situation at hand. Though Alan shared that he felt this was dialogue, the dialogue appeared to be more talk, and a unilateral approach, with Alan providing the opportunity for the conversation to occur yet a deeper understanding of the root of the problem is not yet impacted by the conversation. Therefore, in this instance, there is not evidence to support a deeper understanding of the problem.

While Alan suggests that his conversations are “constant” with parents and students, he also talked to teachers about understanding culture. Most recently, he had spoken with teachers about studies of Hispanic and African American students and “acting White.” He talked to the teachers about how studies show that in the Hispanic and African American culture that “acting white” and getting good grades is “not cool” and students “don’t want to do well in a White education system.” Thus, “we need to understand this cultural stuff and always find ways to encourage kids.” By Alan discussing culture with his staff, it showed that he is willing to discuss pertinent issues of race and class in schools.

Eliminating tracks is another strategy that Alan claimed he uses to create an inclusive school. “We’re trying to destroy the tracks,” Alan stated. Creating a system that supports and encourages students is the model that Alan suggested should be in all schools. He shared, “The
whole mindset is, treat every kid the same, but you put the supports in place so that they can reach the same goal, standard.” In order to do this, Alan worked closely with his District level administrative team and with his teachers. Changing the mindset of the teachers relative to tracking is a challenge, according to Alan. Alan asserted that he “used dialogue” to talk to teachers about the importance of “treating kids the same,” but this conversation appears to be unilateral versus a true representation of dialogue. Teachers indicated “little or no discussion exists” about inclusive practices, yet Alan shared a previous story about discussing issues of race and class. Thus, based on data, it does not appear that there is a shared agreement or understanding in some instances as a result of meaningful dialogue and there appears to be a disconnect between Alan’s interview and teacher survey feedback. The next section will provide detailed findings specific to the role of dialogue in Alan’s work as a principal.

**Dialogue**

*Dialogue is really the key to changing the mindset of a building.* (Alan Jacobs)

Alan Jacobs believes that dialogue makes a difference in his work as a principal trying to create an inclusive community. In Alan’s opinion, changing leadership throughout the years has impacted the amount of dialogue occurring in the building; however, Alan claimed he wants that to change. He posited, “You can’t have the conversations that you need to have in a building without relationships and trust. There has to be open conversations.”

Much of Alan’s discussion about dialogue and open conversations focuses on the teacher. He tells his teachers, “If I am not talking to you, that’s when you have to worry.” Alan understood the demands placed on school systems in today’s school reform efforts, and still claimed that dialogue is the key. He stated, “There has to be dialogue. As much as the state and federal government wants this to be an industry where we are producing something and every little piece of the assembly line fits, this is a job where you’re working with people.” He shared
that the lack of dialogue can negatively impact the school, especially low income and struggling schools. “If we don’t have that conversation to have creative discussions about how we are going to spend money to have an afterschool program, all of those are conversations that have to take place.” Alan goes so far as to give a percentage of time of which administrators should be having dialogue in their roles. “Ninety percent of an administrator’s time should be these conversations. I don’t know if you could put a high enough number on it.” Consequently, through observations, it does not appear that 90% of Alan’s time was spent on having the important conversations that Alan spoke of in his interviews. In fact, through my observations, Alan was in his office much of the time with meetings about scheduling for the next year, and I observed Alan to be in his office attending to school safety and discipline issues.

Through those observations, however, it was observed that Alan’s conversations with his counselors was an important component to moving the school forward and could be considered dialogue because of the understanding that transpired as a result of the conversation. As an example, Alan and two counselors met as a team to discuss the upcoming year’s master schedule. Through the dialogue, it was observed that Alan was challenging the team to think about the names of courses and how students were placed into the tracked courses. For instance, Alan asked the counselors what other names could be used other than program names for student intervention blocks. One counselor asked, “Why does it matter?” Alan suggested that naming the courses in that manner labels students and creates inequities without even realizing it. The counselor responded, “I have never thought of it like that. It makes sense.” Next, another course in the schedule was discussed. Alan, struggling with naming a course for the following year stated:

*I don’t know what to call that class. I don’t like Reading Improvement. That’s the one I kept throwing out, reading improvement. Can you imagine? Hey, I need help in reading.*
Through this conversation with his counselor, Alan had a better understanding of the situation and determined that it would be best to meet with a group of students and let them name the course to provide them with a voice about the name and to have a conversation to avoid a common stigma associated with various intervention courses in schools. Thus, it appears that dialogue occurred in this instance as the counselors came to a better understanding about an exclusive practice at the school.

Although Alan expressed the importance of dialogue in schools, he claimed there is not enough dialogue in schools today. One reason for a lack of dialogue, in Alan’s opinion, is a rift between teachers and administrators. He stated, “There is a mindset where teachers and administrators have kind of separated themselves. And because of that, that creates a void for these discussions.” Alan suggested that the rift “prohibits good conversation.” Through observations, I did not see Alan meeting with teams of teachers. During my time at Kingsworth, Alan had a packed schedule and meeting with teams of teachers was not part of his routine. While Alan understands the importance of dialogue and admits there is not enough dialogue, I observed that he, too, has fallen victim to the demands of the system and felt that time constraints are a barrier to having the necessary conversations.

And, while relationships continue to be at the forefront of Alan’s world, time constraints also played a role. Alan noted that teacher and administrator expectations are becoming increasingly overwhelming for educators, and the time factor is important to note. As an example, it was observed that Alan spent much of his time in the main office while I was an observer at his school. When Alan would try to leave his office, there was usually a student waiting to see him or he was meeting with an individual teacher. During our interview, Alan’s
phone rang every 10 minutes or so. It was evident that he felt cramped for time and that he appeared to feel confined to his office. During his interview he even stated, “If I don’t get out and see the kids, I feel bad about it.”

**Teacher Perceptions**

In many of Alan’s interviews, he spoke to the importance of teachers being “on board” with creating an inclusive school. I asked Alan to e-mail an online survey out to his teachers that explained the purpose of the study and indicated that their responses would be anonymous. He encouraged all teachers to complete the survey and also indicated that he wanted to attend each team meeting prior to sending out the survey to encourage teachers to complete the survey; however, Alan was unable to get to team meetings to discuss the survey before he e-mailed it out to his teachers.

Out of 61 teachers at Kingsworth, 25 responded to the survey. Ten respondents were teachers with 2-5 years of experience, 6 respondents had 11-15 years of experience, three respondents had 6-10 years, and three respondents had 16+ years. A large majority of respondents, 18, indicated that they had daily team meeting time at Kingsworth; however, 17 out of 18 responding teachers indicated that Mr. Jacobs “rarely” or “never” attended team meetings with the teams or departments. Based on observations at Kingsworth, coupled with Alan’s interview, it appeared that teachers accurately reported Alan’s lack of attendance at team meetings.

Teachers were asked to give their opinions on how often they consistently discuss certain items as a team with their principal. Table 3 represents the results of this portion of the survey. As indicated in the table, out of all of the topics presented, student behavior was rated as the highest response with 17 respondents indicating they “often” or “frequently” discuss with the
principal. Similarly, student concerns and bullying were rated as topics that are often or frequently discussed. The lowest rating of discussion with the principal out of this section was standardized testing processes, teacher evaluation, and budget.

Table 3

*Topics Consistently Discussed with Principal—Kingsworth*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td>15% (3)</td>
<td>20% (4)</td>
<td><strong>30% (6)</strong></td>
<td>25% (5)</td>
<td>10% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized testing processes</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>24% (5)</td>
<td>29% (6)</td>
<td><strong>33% (7)</strong></td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher evaluation</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td><strong>36% (8)</strong></td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td><strong>41% (9)</strong></td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>29% (6)</td>
<td><strong>48% (10)</strong></td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student placement</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td>17% (4)</td>
<td><strong>39% (9)</strong></td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td>17% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td><strong>39% (9)</strong></td>
<td>35% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td><strong>41% (9)</strong></td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td><strong>36% (8)</strong></td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td><strong>26% (6)</strong></td>
<td>17% (4)</td>
<td><strong>26% (6)</strong></td>
<td>17% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student concerns</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td><strong>32% (7)</strong></td>
<td><strong>32% (7)</strong></td>
<td>28% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td><strong>35% (8)</strong></td>
<td><strong>35% (8)</strong></td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School improvement planning</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td><strong>26% (6)</strong></td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
<td><strong>39% (9)</strong></td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another section of the survey asked teachers to respond to how often they consistently discussed specific items that are frequently referred to in the literature review relative to inclusive schools and inclusive leadership. Table 4 represents these data shared by teachers at Kingsworth.
Table 4

*Topics Consistently Discussed with Principal—Kingsworth*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equity in education</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td><strong>46% (10)</strong></td>
<td>23% (7)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity in education</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td><strong>37% (8)</strong></td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in schools</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td><strong>46% (10)</strong></td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in schools</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td><strong>37% (8)</strong></td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for students</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td><strong>32% (7)</strong></td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td><strong>32% (7)</strong></td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td><strong>27% (6)</strong></td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td><strong>27% (6)</strong></td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of poverty</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td><strong>32% (7)</strong></td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td><strong>36% (8)</strong></td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td><strong>59% (13)</strong></td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td><strong>41% (9)</strong></td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td><strong>41% (9)</strong></td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td><strong>50% (11)</strong></td>
<td>36% (8)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the percentage of respondents and how they responded and also includes the number of actual respondents in parentheses. The category with the most respondents in each section is bolded. Out of these topics, parental involvement ranked highest with eight respondents indicating that they “often” or “frequently” discussed the topic with their principal. Opportunities for students and students of poverty were next, and topics of gender, sexual orientation, and religion ranked last with only one respondent indicating that he or she “often” discusses the topic with the principal. As indicated by the table, it appears that the topics related to inclusive school communities are not frequently discussed between Alan and his teachers, which may be a result of the challenges that Alan addressed through his interviews.
Another section of the survey asked teachers to indicate how frequently their principal engages in inclusive practices. Table 5 represents the teachers’ responses.

Table 5

*Iinclusive Practices at Kingsworth*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does your principal:</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage leadership</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
<td>41% (9)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include participants in decision-making in the school</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>41% (9)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for inclusion</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>41% (9)</td>
<td>36% (8)</td>
<td>14% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote dialogue</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize student learning and classroom practice</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>41% (9)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage me to take risks</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>23% (5)</td>
<td>27% (6)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible in building</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>41% (9)</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available to listen to others’ viewpoints</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>18% (4)</td>
<td>32% (7)</td>
<td>36% (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of these topics, 15 of Alan’s teachers responded that he is available to listen to others’ viewpoints often or frequently, 13 responded that he is visible in the building often or frequently, and 11 teachers of out 18 indicated that he advocated for inclusion and promoted dialogue often or frequently. The lowest percentages from this section were relative to encouraging teachers to take risks (eight teachers reported often or frequently) and including participants in decision-making processes (nine teachers reported often or frequently). These data, coupled with other observational data, suggest that Alan has an open-door policy and makes himself available to his teachers but that he is not yet promoting dialogue in the manner that he believed is needed in an inclusive school.
Teachers were asked to give their opinion about the leadership style that best described their principal. Choices included managerial/technical (strong focus on the management/operations), humanistic (focus on the person), transformational (inspirational, charismatic leadership that focuses on school improvement), transformative (inclusive leadership processes which focus on social justice and equitable opportunities). These leadership terms are designed from a managerial approach, or one which focuses little on dialogue and focuses more on routine, structure, and management of a school, and ranges to a transformative style, or one which has a strong focus on dialogue, equity, and social justice. Seven respondents reported Alan’s style as managerial/technical, six teachers responded as transformational, five respondents reported him as humanistic, and four teachers reported him as transformative. Three respondents chose to skip the question. It is possible that respondents did not completely understand the range of the leadership definitions and were unable to differentiate the approaches, although a short definition accompanied each of the styles. At times, my observational data also suggest that Alan’s leadership style is represented by a technical approach because of the focus on managerial aspects of his position. However, through our interviews, he appears to have a humanistic approach when speaking about his relationships with students and goals that he has for them. During our conversations, data suggested that Alan was striving to be a transformative leader but was still struggling to navigate the challenges and barriers to create an inclusive school.

Trust within the school community was a topic that Alan stressed quite often during his interviews. In the teacher’s survey, seven respondents indicated there was a low level of trust between the team and the principal, 11 indicated there was a moderate level of trust, and five teachers responded that an extremely high level of trust existed. These data suggest that there is a
disconnect between Alan’s feelings about the importance of trust and the actual perception of teacher respondents and their feelings about trust. Through his interviews, Alan stressed the importance of the teachers and how he wants to talk to them more but lacks the time to do so. Additionally, data suggest that Alan does not consistently attend the team meetings at his buildings. Based on these data, Alan’s inability to build trust within the staff might be directly linked to the challenges that he suggested during his interviews.

Teachers were asked to respond how often they engage in inclusive practices at school. Topics included the following: calling home to parents for positive reasons, making selves available to community members, frequenting areas where colleagues, students, and parents gather outside of school building, going out into community to meet and visit with people, exchanging information with parents and community, employing surveys to collect information about the community’s beliefs, needs, and values, using newsletters, school newspapers, and meetings to get information out to community, and inviting parents and community groups into the school. Teachers were asked to respond by indicating never, seldom, sometimes, often, or frequently. Twenty-one teachers answered the question, and four skipped the question. Out of all eight of the aforementioned topics, the highest rank of the majority respondents fell into the “sometimes” or “seldom” categories. Therefore, out of the 21 respondents, none of the responses fell into a category of “often” or “frequently,” which suggests that none of the topics are discussed on a regular basis. And of the topics, the highest ranked section came from 10 teachers who indicated they often or frequently made themselves available to community members, while an additional 11 teachers indicated they “sometimes” made themselves available. Next in rank was exchanging information with parents/community with 10 teachers reporting they often or frequently exchange information, and 9 additional teachers said they “sometimes” exchange
information. The lowest rank in the categories of “often” and “frequently” resulted from using newsletters to get information to community (four reported often or frequently), going into community to visit with people (five reported often or frequently), and employing surveys to collect information about community’s needs, beliefs, and values (two responded often). These data suggest that teachers are not actively engaging in inclusive practices on a regular basis.

Teachers were asked to give their feedback on students, parents, and teachers being involved in decision-making processes at their school. The majority of teachers responded “sometimes involved” for all three categories. Similarly, teachers were asked to give their response to the extent that students, parents, and have a voice into the school curriculum. Six respondents reported that students “seldom” have a voice, 10 said that they “sometimes” have a voice, and four said they “never” have a voice. No respondents indicated that students “frequently” or “often” have a voice. As for parents, nine teachers responded that parents “sometimes” have a voice, and four respondents said parents “often” have a voice into school curriculum. Nine respondents, indicated that parents “seldom” or “never” have a voice. On the other hand, the majority of teachers responded that they “often” have a voice into school curriculum, with 10 respondents, or 46% indicating they often have a voice. Five responded that they “frequently” have a voice, five responded “sometimes,” and two responded “seldom.” None responded that they “never” have a voice. These data suggest that teachers feel that they have more decision-making opportunities than students or parents, yet there are still some teachers who feel that they have no voice at all.

One of the questions on the survey asked teachers, “To what extent do parents of historically minoritized (low income, visible minority) students have a represented voice in school curriculum, programs, and learning opportunities?” Teachers responded the following:
frequent (no respondents); often (three respondents); sometimes (11 respondents); seldom (seven respondents); and never (one respondent). Similarly, teachers were asked an open-ended response to the following question: What structures are in place within the school for diverse and marginalized groups to be heard? A few of the teachers’ responses included the following:

*All are invited to Board meetings and open houses and parent teacher conferences are encouraged to call teachers and administrators whenever it is convenient for the parent.*

*We have PTO. Only five members ever show. We have parent meetings inviting parents in. Less than 5% of our parents show. We want them to be heard. The problem is they do not speak.*

*That’s a good question. Besides social work/counseling, there are not too many other things in place.*

Several other respondents indicated “Not sure,” and “None that I know of,” and four others mentioned the school’s PTO. Data suggest that teachers do not engage in inclusive practices within the school and place blame on parents for their lack of participation. As an example, the teacher above states that “parents are invited” and another suggests that the school “wants parents to be heard, but the problem is that they [parents] do not speak.” This comment suggests a deficit thinking approach that blames the victim instead of taking responsibility as educators. This information would support Alan’s concerns in his interview about teachers not understanding the why students can buy a $100 pair of shoes, yet do not have school supplies. Comments such as these negate inclusive practices. Furthermore, data also suggest that some teachers do not believe that opportunities exist for marginalized parents to be heard.

In the survey, teachers were asked to give their opinion on what the term “inclusive school environment” means to them. Fourteen teachers responded to the open-ended question. One teacher discussed the need for special education students to be included, while the majority of teachers wrote about the need for everyone to be included in the school. One member indicated, “I don’t know. We have never discussed this as a faculty.” Other responses included:
It means a partnership within and between the school and community. Faculty need to play a more important role in determining the vision of the school. Our school district leadership is unfamiliar with the population that they serve. Our faculty are disenfranchised from one another. This goes to the very heart of our problems.

Another teacher responded:

>The term inclusive school community has a different meaning for me than it's demonstrated in the school. Inclusion to me means helping individuals needs in the most appropriate ways possible in general education classes so that students learn to be more accepting and excited about diversity, yet value individual differences.

These data suggest that opportunities for dialogue either do not exist or are not occurring at Kingsworth to the extent that Alan and his staff would like them to be. As an example, one teacher suggested that staff should have more voice into the school’s vision. The same staff member suggested that the staff is “disenfranchised” from each other. Another teacher shared that the term had a different meaning than “is demonstrated in the school.” In other words, the teacher suggested that she understands what it should be, but suggested that it is not happening that way at Kingsworth. Yet again, these data suggest that dialogue is not occurring on a consistent basis and that a disconnect exists.

Another open-ended question asked teachers to answer the following question: “How is dialogue used to provide opportunities for everyone’s voice to be heard?” Twelve teachers responded to the question. Some teachers mentioned that they could ask to be entered on the agenda at faculty meetings, while others mentioned conferences; one person mentioned, “SIP makes sure dialogues are heard and action is taken.” Three respondents said they “weren’t sure” and “didn’t think there were any opportunities available.” One respondent wrote, “I spend as much time in the community as I possible can. I make regular home visits to parents. I transport kids in need. I am willing to do anything it takes to keep the parents involved whenever possible.” Another respondent commented, “People can voice their concerns, but it doesn’t mean it will be heard. By heard I mean that changes are made.” Like the previous data, these data also
suggest that some teachers are frustrated with not having a voice at school, yet others gave examples of how the School Improvement Plan Team (SIP) gave them an opportunity for dialogue to occur. Several respondents suggested that they are not aware of opportunities to have a voice into the school. And one respondent suggested that she will do “whatever it takes” to build relationships. These data, joined with Alan’s interview data, suggest that overall, people at Kingsworth would like to have more opportunities for dialogue and want to create an inclusive environment, but are unclear as to ways to make that happen.

**Student Perceptions**

In order to provide a detailed and clear picture of the school setting, I conducted student focus groups at each school in order to better understand students’ perceptions of their learning environment. Principals were asked to select five students from their school and obtain parental permission in order for me to conduct the focus group. Alan selected five students whom he believed “truly represent all aspects of the school community.” Three of the students were female and two were male. Four students interviewed were African American and one was Caucasian. The students and I met in a conference room together. Based on the enthusiasm and candid responses of the students, I believe that the students were forthright and honest with all of their comments.

First, students were asked to tell about themselves including their age, grade, what classes they enjoyed at school, what activities that they were a part of outside of school, and what they wanted to be when they grow up. Their responses included a football player or a lawyer, a football player or an artist, a teacher or a nurse, a doctor, and a writer. When asked to tell about their school, the first student who responded said, “Ok, can I start with the worst thing? Well, I’d say the lunches . . . I don’t know the good part about the school. I really don’t.” Another student
quickly responded, “I think it’s kind of like too much violence at this school. They be fighting and stuff. And we try to not get involved, right?” Another student shares that one thing she likes about school is the field trips. When asked what field trips have been enjoyable, she responds, “Most of them have been cancelled. But Friday we’re going to Six Flags.” These data suggest that opportunities outside of the core curricula are limited, and many opportunities were eliminated without communication to students as to why they were cancelled, which again imply a lack of dialogue and meaningful communication.

Fairness became a focal point of conversation for the students at Kingsworth. Students reported that they would like to have rules in place that both students and teachers should have to follow. As an example, one student commented:

When they make up rules for kids like they can’t have their cell phones out. Why do teachers do it and the students can’t? And like they say students can’t do all this other stuff and the teachers do it . . . I want to change that. Cause like teachers they do stuff that kids are not supposed to do. Like they use their cell phones in class and stuff. And like they shouldn’t do something that they don’t want the kids to do.

While students expressed their concern about school violence, rules, and lunches, they also commented on positives at the school. In particular, all of the students had a favorite teacher or staff member whom they believed makes a difference in their life. One teacher, who was the “favorite teacher” for several students, had made an impact because, according to the students, “She gives us wisdom. Sometimes like she knows like kids and what they do or whatever. And she tells us the right thing to do rather than the wrong thing.” Another student chimed in, “She explains like she explains to us what we do wrong and she helps us out to understand it better like what we need to do. She gives us positive attitude. She gives us good advice.” They also spoke about their principal, Mr. Jacobs. “I talk to him. . . . He talks to me about like how good I’ve been doing and all that. He said, “I like the way you’ve been doing fourth quarter and stuff like that. And he always tells me “that’s a really good job.” Another student responded about his
conversations with Mr. Jacobs and reported, “Well, he’s been talking to me a lot. I don’t really—yeah—I be listening, but sometimes he talks a lot! And yeah, it be hard sometimes, but . . . Man is real cool. We can talk about schools and stuff.” The student gave examples of speaking to the principal before school in the hallways, during school in the hallways, and during lunch. He also said that the principal will sometimes “call him in” to his office to check in on him.

I then asked students how they have a voice at their school. Students quickly responded, “We don’t. They don’t never have any activities where we can.” Another student commented, “Kids don’t have rights at this school.” Another stated, “We just do what we normally do. Come to school and learn.” When asked what they would like to see in place to have a voice, students commented that they would like to be able to vote on things, like teachers do. One student said, “Change the rules a little bit. Not like change all of them, but change some. Like make some rules for teachers. Or apply the same rules that students have for teachers.” One student gave an example:

*Because like if your mom get really hurt or whatever, you have your phone in class, they could let you know that your mom is really hurt. She can call us and stuff. And tell us, so we could actually talk to her and see what’s wrong at home or whatever before we even get there. I think we should keep our phones.*

Another student is quick to respond to this comment and stated, “Not all of the time though. You shouldn’t have your phone out in class when it’s learning time. You should do that on your own time. The first student responds back, “I know that . . . but, when it’s our family . . .”

Other items that students indicated that they would like to have a voice about were locker stops, having more access to books, going outside for recess, and more pep rallies to build school spirit. And yet another student suggested that the school could have an assembly on how they are going to improve their school. He said, “We only have pep rallies about sports. That’s important, but not that important. We need more stuff like . . .” and another student responds, “Education.”
He said, “Yes, education.” When I probed for what exactly an assembly about education would look like he said, “Kids that’s been doing good and has improved through the whole year. Like they started off with a bad job and they came back with a positive attitude.” A different student suggested that the school should offer after school tutoring for students. Another said he wished teachers stayed after school longer to help students. He stated, “I know they have personal lives, but kids need help and they should help them. Not often, like the kids who need help though, teachers should stay after school for them.” These data suggest that there are limited opportunities for students to have a voice at Kingsworth, yet students express they want to have a voice.

Students were asked to respond how their parents get involved at school and how parents in general are involved. One student responded:

My parents always do. They always ask me what I’m having trouble with and what’s going on at school. Like when I bring homework home, my mom, she’s like a nurse and everything. She graduated master’s and everything. She be helping me understand some things.

Another student commented:

My mom, she helps me out sometimes even though she’s not always there cause she has work. And my sister, she’s a nurse too. She does all this stuff for me. And yeah, she helps me out with all that. She helps me with homework. She tells me and my mom and mom, and ask me how is my day and all that. She helps me with my work when she’s around, when she has time. And my dad. I don’t really see him that much, because he’s a businessman in Chicago. But, he calls me and asks me how I’ve been doing.

When I asked the Caucasian student of the group about parent involvement, she responded, “Nothing to get involved in. I’m just a regular student who does my work and makes good grades.” This comment suggests that the student does not see the need for parent involvement, unless there is a problem with her grades or behavior. This is an interesting comment to note because this student, the only Caucasian student, associated parent involvement with a problem behavior instead of support. Based on this comment, there would appear to be little dialogue
occurring between her parents and the school because she does exhibit behavioral problems and does her school work.

Students were asked if they were successful at school and why they believed they were, or were not, successful. For the most part, all students indicated that they believed they were successful and most attributed it to their parents and teachers. One student reported, “I’m not that great, but like I try—and the teachers motivate me to turn in my work. And my parents, they help me, too.” Yet, students recognized that some of their peers are not as successful. When asked what makes them less successful, one student responded, “They don’t have good grades. They don’t pay attention in class.” Another stated, “They like throw spit balls and stuff when the teacher leaves the room. But then the teacher come back and they’re still like loud and things. Like they be smart, they don’t do good on paper.” When asked why “smart students” do not do well on paper, one student suggested, “Cause like they’re in different groups and like if they’re smart, they’re like not cool [to their group].” These data would directly support Alan’s discussion earlier about how students from minority backgrounds do not want to be considered “smart” because of peer group pressure. This data suggest that there is not a culture of inclusiveness at the school at this point.

Students continued to share several suggestions on ways to improve their school and have a voice into the school setting. Near the end of the conversation, four other students were talking about the school schedule. One student, sitting quietly during the discussion about classes, chimed in with the following statement:

_We don’t have a chance to tell teachers what we think. So we should have an assembly where it’s like—not assembly, but something like that where students like write down and tell teachers what they think should be changed. Cause we don’t really have a word in our school. Like the teachers choose everything for us and the principal like they say everything for us. And all we have to do is come to school and learn and make good_
grades and pay attention. So we don’t have a word in the school. We don’t get to talk about what should be changed.

Based on the data from students and from my observations, there does not appear to be opportunities for students to have a voice into their learning and school experiences.

After the interview concluded, students asked me, “What do you do at your school to give students a voice?” I shared with them that I have students on the school leadership team and that I meet with a different group of students from every grade level each month to get an idea of what they like about the school and what they would like to see changed. I also shared that I often visit the homes of my students, and shared that we have a Student Council that is very active and created opportunities for our student body. Students were fascinated by these ideas and said, “Really? Can I come to your school?” I responded that they could do the same types of things at Kingsworth. One student said, “Yeah right—they’ll never listen.” I said, “Do you think your principal would listen?” They said, “Yes, he’d be one of the only ones though.” This comment suggests that little dialogue exists at Kingsworth, yet students have a belief that Alan will listen to them and help them with their concerns and needs.

These data suggest that there are commonalities between the principal, staff and students relative to a lack of dialogue existing at Kingsworth. The principal, Alan, understood the concept and importance of dialogue in the school, yet struggled with challenges and barriers to make it happen. Teachers also expressed concern that they wanted to have a voice, but some placed blame on the students and parents for a lack of participation. Students, too, wanted to have more of a voice, but they expressed concerns about their safety and felt like there was a limited amount of people who could help them, yet the principal was one of the people they felt would help them and listen to them if asked.
Central Elementary School: A Step in the Right Direction

*We can’t blame the parents, and we can’t blame the kids. (Tom Smith)*

School Background

Central Elementary School, located in the central part of a Midwestern state, houses approximately 400 kindergarten through fifth grade students. The district itself is a unit district comprised of 18 schools and has an enrollment of approximately 8,900 students. Central Elementary School’s demographics are listed below.

- Enrollment 408
- White 44%
- Black 29%
- Hispanic 10%
- Asian 16%
- Multiracial 1%
- Mobility 8%
- Low-income 50%

As represented in the table, 50% of the school’s population is students from low-income backgrounds, the mobility rate is 7.7%, the attendance rate is 95%, and there is 100% parental contact as reported on the state report card.

Academically, Central’s standardized achievement scores have improved 15 percentage points, from 65% meeting and exceeding state standards in 2002 to 80% meeting and exceeding state standards in 2010. Although the school has shown academic improvements, the achievement data are still under the overall state average of 81%. As a result, Central did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the 2010 school year.

Utilizing two principal interviews, one teacher survey, one student focus group, and evidence from artifacts, this story follows Tom Smith’s journey of trying to create an inclusive school community.
Principal Background

Tom Smith has been the principal at Central Elementary School for 10 years. Prior to that, he was a principal in another country and a curriculum writer at a state university. According to interview data, Tom believes that his fundamental purpose as the principal at Central is to help teachers recognize the gifts of all students and to provide support where he can “shield them from the political junk of the Central office.” He also expressed that his purpose is to give teachers the tools to succeed with the students. To that end, Tom suggested that he has been successful as the principal at Central as a result of this foundational focus. In fact, he attributed his success to the point that is able to “filter” information “from above” at the district level and make it practical for his teachers. He also believes in incremental change versus radical change. As an example, he spoke about colleagues who were not as successful as he has been as a principal. He attributed their lack of success as trying to “go in and be change agents too quickly and not take a good look at the political landscape around them.” He suggested that if other principals in the district “would have taken a slower approach and understood and maybe honored some of the things that were there, but recognized the need for change” that they would have been more successful.

Tom is also a current doctoral student and working on his dissertation. He stated that much of the work that he brings to his school building is a result of his own research through his doctoral program. He stated, “I’ve been focused on RtI (Response to Intervention), and a big part of my focus is, how with my African American students, is it something that, if I look through the lens of critical race theory, it is a positive thing for African American students?” He continued that his focus throughout the year has been on culturally responsive pedagogy. He reported:
I’ve been sharing with staff members at faculty meetings and just talking about how culturally responsive curriculum really is not another layer, but something we can do to the current curriculum. . . . If you totally ignore race, it’s kind of like ignoring students who you know are struggling or who you know are clearly bored. By having that other dimension of race in there and making those students aware, they are going to feel more comfortable at our school.

In this quote, Tom showed his focus on elements of race and culture. However, Tom was also focused on the notion of deficit thinking in schools. He stated:

>You read critical race theory and one of the assumptions is that racism is endemic throughout American society, right? But that’s pretty hard to chew on and have someone basically say to staff, you know, you’re a racist. That’s when people start to walk out, and that is never a good way to start.

Tom suggested that “We can’t blame the parents and we can’t blame the kids. Only we can make the change that we need to for our kids, and that is the focus of my conversation with my staff and the focus I want to take.” Thus, Tom’s current doctoral work, paired with his past experiences in education, has challenged him to create an inclusive school environment. The next section will discuss Tom’s vision of what an inclusive school community is and how it is created.

Creating an Inclusive School

Tom described an inclusive school environment as one that “really looks beyond bounds.” To Tom, “looking beyond bounds” meant that teachers needed to “look beyond bounds of ethnicity and look at all students’ backgrounds, including low-income kids.” He asked teachers, “How do we include students from poverty in everything we do?” He stated that his district focused on African American students, but he believed that “they [the district] have to go beyond that.” Specifically, he stated, “We have to look at the economic piece to ensure you are not excluding people—like when we have school functions.” As an example, Tom spoke of meeting with his social worker to ensure that at any school event that transportation was
provided, childcare was provided, and food was provided. And, for parents who could not pay to attend, Tom said, “I would find a way to pay it for them.”

Creating an inclusive school is important to Tom, but he suggested that it is a team effort. He placed much emphasis of the importance of the teacher and said, “I want to make sure our teachers really own our students.” Since the school has a large population of students who speak English as their Second Language (ESL), Tom talked about his expectations for his teachers within an inclusive environment. He stated, “I think in the past I have seen situations where the ESL teacher has taken ownership for ESL students’ learning—ownership hasn’t necessarily been the classroom teacher. There has been a shift in that here.” When asked how Tom made that shift, he suggested that it derived from the collaboration meetings and data days at his school. He posited:

*When we look at all of our kids, we talk about what happens in class with this student. When a teacher has problems answering that because they are in ESL (English as a Second Language), I ask the teacher, “They [ESL teachers] are with the student for 60 minutes, but what happens with you [teacher]? You are with the student the majority of the day?”*

*It is not a comfortable conversation to have. Teachers were on the defensive and would say, “We work with them as best as we can.” And then I would ask, “How often do you communicate with the ESL teacher? Have you talked with ESL teacher?” And, they would say no. And so I would say, “Let’s keep that conversation going.”*

*I know my ESL teacher goes out of her way to communicate with classroom teachers. I ask the teachers, “Do you think it’s an English issue or is it something deeper? A number of students are ELL, but there is something not related to an English issue, and it could be another issue.” So I’ll say, “Let’s bring that student to the building intervention team.”*

*Because of the dialogue, teachers see things differently. They now see those issues and think about them now. They never thought about it before we discussed it, but there are still teachers that still feel like that should be the responsibility of the ESL teacher, but they also know the culture of the building as whole won’t support that philosophy. We have to address the real issue—which is the behaviors and expectations—I guess you could say that I force that issue with the teachers.*
Through this dialogue between Tom and his teachers, a deeper understanding about ESL students’ needs has occurred. Tom recognized that some teachers still hold on to the philosophy that ‘those students’ are not their responsibility, but he understood that the culture of the building was stronger than a few teachers’ views. Tom also shared that he has to “force” the issue with teachers in that he has the difficult conversations to get to a deeper understanding of educating the children.

During one of his interviews, Tom also spoke about the African American population at his school. He stated that in an inclusive environment, he is always looking at how marginalized groups of students are doing. As an example, he asked his team, “What do the intervention groups look like? Are they successful for these students?” And, when speaking about an inclusive environment, he talked about students with disabilities. “I think we have put more accountability on our teachers in terms of using our literacy block so it’s not, these are your students—you go work with them and fix them.” Thus, Tom suggested that an inclusive environment is one which enhances the gifts of each student and embraces the differences to include all students, which would mirror Shields (2002) notion of a community of difference.

Tom also recommended that principals in an inclusive environment must ask the difficult questions to gain a deeper understanding about the root problems being discussed. And with those discussions come challenges. Thus, the next section describes challenges that Tom faced when trying to create an inclusive school.

**Challenges to Creating an Inclusive School**

Tom provided several challenges to his work as the principal of Central. Through one interview, Tom shared that the “biggest challenge is just getting everyone on board,” yet, in a subsequent interview he stated that the “biggest challenge is time.” Nevertheless, challenges are
evident for Tom as he works towards creating an inclusive environment and he suggested that giving students labels in education is a detrimental practice. As an example, he stated, “When you look at kids, you have to look beyond labels of special education or ESL.” Tom was quick to respond to why he chose those two populations of students when he said:

*There’s the inclusiveness factor for those two in particular. It’s so easy for teachers to say, oh that’s an ESL student and I don’t really have to worry about them. No, actually you do have to worry about them. When I’m doing evaluations I’ll always include, how do you meet the needs of your ESL students? Tell me about their goals and how you reinforce their goals in the classroom? I feel like it’s a cop out to push it on the people [who are specialists].*

While getting everyone on board is a struggle for Tom, he also shared that there are several other challenges that exist when trying to create an inclusive school. As an example, challenging teachers’ notion of deficit thinking was a challenge for Tom. Tom spoke of teachers who do not understand why students or parents “don’t care,” and how teachers place blame on students and parents. To challenge this thinking, Tom believes that principals need to have difficult conversations to move the building forward. For instance, Tom said he would hear teachers make comments like, “If their parents would just care more then the students would do better,” and “Because of the parents, we can’t get them to care.” Tom felt that these were excuses instead of effective communication tools to move forward. He stated, “It is about challenging those beliefs. We have to work with what we can control.”

Similarly, Tom shared that the race factor is a continued challenge because teachers do not necessarily understand other’s cultures or backgrounds. To address this issue, Tom brought panels of parents to the building to speak to the staff. He gave an example of an African American father who spoke to the staff about holding high expectations for African American students. The father shared that just because students do not have their homework completed it does not mean that the family does not care. Rather, the father on the panel suggested that the
parents of African American students might have different priorities and might work several jobs to make ends meet, leaving the student to complete work on his or her own every night. Tom believed that the message came through because of the parent perspective. As an extension, Tom created time during faculty meetings to discuss the parent panel and “we generated dialogue and conversations.” Tom indicated that he asked staff members, “How has this changed the way you look at our kids and parents?” Through their answers, Tom suggested that he got a sense that they saw things differently and thus, staff was “more inclusive.”

Finally, Tom suggested that professional development for staff is a concern when trying to create an inclusive school because professional development needs to be positive, focused, and should allow for deep dialogue and conversation about the topics presented. Tom gave an example of how he makes professional development opportunities positive and effective. He spoke of an activity called the Cultural Continuum. Staff was asked to place on the continuum comments such as, “Why do they keep sending us these kids?” That comment would be placed on the far right of the continuum under “ignoring culture and degrading it.” On the other hand, topics like “a food fiesta” would be placed in the middle. And, through the activity, staff was asked questions like, “What would we do every day to inclusive to all races?” And, “Why do we only celebrate Black History for one month out of the year? Why don’t we celebrate it all year?” Questions such as these drove the conversation between Tom and his staff. Tom asserted that activities such as these promote dialogue and provide a “deeper understanding.” While this challenge ultimately became a strategy as well, the next section will provide additional strategies that Tom shared relative to creating an inclusive school community.
Strategies to Create an Inclusive School

Tom believed that the first thing schools should do to create an inclusive school is to set a theme or vision for the year. Specifically, he shared that his team of teachers revisited the school’s mission statement. Through this process, he expected that staff members could speak to the mission of the school and described how the mission is to “recognize every student and illuminate their success.” According to Tom, the philosophy of the school “fights the deficit thinking approach and looks at how you can recognize positive characteristics in every child.” Tom asserted that revising the mission statement was a critical element for dialogue.

Another strategy that Tom discussed was the culturally responsive training. Although the training was “district mandated,” Tom believed that it was “culturally responsive light—it just touched on the edge of things.” Thus, Tom took the training discussions into his staff meetings where he could dialogue with his team of teachers. Specifically, Tom created case scenarios and “took it to a deeper level.” Tom attributed the success of the dialogue to the fact that there were a “variety of people on staff” and “people were able to speak to the background of the scenarios.” He continued, “The big one for us is obviously the African American population. That seems to something we come back to a lot.”

Tom expressed that the performance of African American students in school was a continuous discussion for his staff. A data wall is examined throughout the year that tracks student performance. “We definitely don’t have a lot of African American students who exceed [standards on the state achievement test]. The question is why and are there any [African American students] that we can promote to the “exceeds” group [on the state achievement test] so that we can insure to challenge them?” Questions such as these drove Tom’s conversations with staff to develop a deeper understanding of the needs of students and staff.
Dialogue about curriculum and instructional pedagogy are strategies that Tom felt were critical to creating an inclusive environment. As an example, Tom spoke about the gifted population and programs at his school. Students who tested into the gifted program were allowed to leave their current school and go to another school with a gifted program. Tom suggested that one of his proudest accomplishments at the school was the fact that this past year 21 students could have left his building to go into the gifted program at another school, and only 1 student chose to leave Central to go another school. Tom attributed students staying at Central “to the fact that we’ve really tried to meet their needs through our enrichment program and making sure we examine how many minority students are in our programs. We look at the ways that students show their giftedness.” Yet, the enrollment and acceptance of minority students in the gifted program has become a concern because there are so few minority students in the program. Tom suggested that part of the issue is the identification process. He used an example of a conversation that he had about gifted education and African American students. For instance, according to Tom, there are very few African American students in the gifted program, which is not representative of the school or district demographic. Tom shared that part of the issue is the identification process because “it is not helping identify some of our diverse students in that some ways it actually excludes them.” As another example for a minority group, Tom said that ELL students are also not represented equitably in the gifted population, and one of the tests for gifted identification is a highly verbal test. Tom said, “That is not fair because English is not their first language.”

Another strategy that Tom believed created an inclusive school is having an environment that included students and families with different sexual and family orientations. As an example, Tom spoke of students at the building who have “two moms” and stated that there are a “number
of homosexual or lesbian parent groups” at the school. He continued, “I think more than anything, we’ve created a climate at least that’s comfortable in our building so there is a comfort in bringing their children here.” Tom said that the teachers and social workers do a “good job of putting family scenarios in a positive light.” Tom gave credit to the work of his team and said that diverse family orientations have been “more accepted by the student body.” During the student focus group interview, one of the students also spoke about her friend with “two moms.” However, the teacher survey did not show that Tom had dialogue with his teachers about sexual or family orientation. These data suggest that the conversation is not occurring between Tom and his teachers to the extent that he would like.

Tom suggested that it is important to find resources for students of poverty. Tom gave credit to his staff and called them “amazing” in that they “recognize when kids needs support and they find the resources.” Students and families of poverty are connected with resources within the community, but Tom said his staff, “goes above and beyond.” He spoke of staff, including himself, who provided transportation for families who want to go to the local college basketball games or to the roller skating nights. If Tom received tickets to the games, he gave them to families and students who would not get the opportunity otherwise. These data align with his teachers’ perceptual data about their parental and community involvement, which are rated as topics that are regularly discussed between Tom and his teachers.

While Tom suggested that he struggled with getting people on board, he also suggested that the “race piece” is something that continued to be a challenge. Tom credited his English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and said that “they just get it.” He gave an example that ESL teachers created mini dictionaries for students who have just come from Russia or Korea. In other words, these books were created for students who have no English in their daily language.
He said that the strategy has raised the comfort level for students who may be visiting Central for a short time because their parents are visiting faculty at the local university. Additionally, the school had created a Language Ambassador program, in which students who spoke another language became ambassadors for their home language for new students who transferred into the school. Tom gave an example:

*I have a fifth grade student and two years ago she could not speak—she speaks French. She was shy and timid. She is still getting ESL, but she is so confident now and has become a language ambassador. She’s helped us when we have had parents come from the Congo and they only speak French. We couldn’t find an interpreter, so she helped. And then she’s also helped us with students feeling comfortable in the classroom and raised the comfort level of our ESL population. Those are the things that I see as being really inclusive.*

This example provided insight into students’ involvement within the culture of inclusiveness in the school. As a result of the students’ involvement, both student and teachers felt more at ease with the transition for students who speak another language.

Tom understood the importance for staff to take academic, social, and emotional responsibility for their students. As an example, Tom said that when teachers made comments to him about students and parents, he made it a point to bring the conversation back to what he and teachers can do differently. He stated, “If you think about it, if they’re [parents] working two jobs a day, how can you put it on them [parents]? We [Teachers] have to do something—this is their [students] opportunity while they’re here at school.” Tom continued, “I just put it back to that dimension of let’s not blame them [students and parents], let’s see what we can do. We can’t control the actions of what parents do. We can only control what we can do here within the school.” In a subsequent interview, I asked Tom to speak more to this quote and asked how teachers responded to these comments about deficit thinking models in practice. Tom said:

*Some teachers are pretty set in that thinking. I say to them, ‘Let’s focus our energy on what we can do. Why aren’t we focusing on what we can do now?’ I give them success stories of student who were in bad situations and then became successful. I remind them*
that students share they became successful because of a teacher. At some point, they just realize that they have an opportunity to change it around.”

Based on these data, it would appear that teachers are open to dialogue and are creating a deeper understanding of the issues that Tom discusses with them. Thus, the next section provides detailed description about the role of dialogue in Tom’s work when creating an inclusive school community.

Dialogue

One of the strategies that Tom claimed was critical to creating an inclusive school was the idea that dialogue was the central component to his work, and through dialogue, the notion of building community was vital. As an example, Tom’s school hosted a “community meeting” every month. According to Tom, community meetings are where “we come together as a school.” At the meetings, the focus is the dialogue between Tom, his teachers, and the students about character pillars. As an example, Tom reflected on a situation where the discussion focused on respect and bullying. Various staff members were videotaped as they shared stories of times where they were bullied. Tom shared:

*I tell you, the most powerful one that we had was one of my aides, and he is this huge black man, 6’ 4”, 300 pounds. He talked about how he was bullied and bullied into trying to get into gangs and how his family had to move because the bullying was so bad that they were trying to harm his sister and his family. Everybody was mesmerized by this.*

Through that interaction, students, teachers, and the principal engaged in dialogue as they shared about respect and bullying in their own school and came to a deeper understanding about principles of appreciation and diversity. Tom believed that through the community meetings, students and teachers are provided with a venue to share their experiences openly and in a safe manner to gain a better understanding of each other’s needs. Through these community meetings, sharing and celebration occurred and students were recognized for their character.
According to Tom, dialogue also occurred at the school’s leadership team meetings, where representatives from each grade level are present and parents attend the meetings. Tom prided himself on having an “open door policy” where “people feel comfortable telling [him] if there are issues.” Nevertheless, sometimes the open door opened conversations about items that Tom was not necessarily aware of and brought people to share negative feelings. Tom remembered a story where a teacher came in to share her feelings about negativity in the building. Through the dialogue, Tom listened to her concerns, shared his perspective with her, and because of the dialogue, a deeper understanding on both perspectives developed. Tom left the conversation having a better understanding of what was the happening in the building and the teacher left feeling more positive about the work that they had accomplished throughout the year. As a result, Tom described that he felt “more like a counselor” at times in his position.

Through observations and through several interviews, it appeared that Tom believed in the importance of dialogue in his work as a principal. In fact, Tom suggested:

*Dialogue is everything. The dialogue that you have with individuals is important, but as a group—it really sets a tone. How people communicate and come to an understanding makes a difference. Leadership is so important and the key piece to it, is dialogue. And, dialogue in a sense that the other person or people know what you stand for—when conversations happen, those are important things for everyone involved in that moment to understand.*

Tom’s discussion about dialogue suggests an ontological approach because he has a strong belief that dialogue is “everything” and thus, sees it as a way of life. Furthermore, Tom’s dialogue with staff, parents, and students brought a shared understanding to the examples that he provided in his interview. Through observations and other data, it would appear that Tom is striving to use dialogue as a foundation of his work as a principal at Central.
Teacher Perceptions

An online survey was e-mailed out by Tom to his teachers at Central Elementary. Out of 18 teachers at Central, eight chose to take the survey. Five respondents were teachers with 2-5 years of experience, one respondent had 11-15 years of experience, one respondent had 6-10 years, one teacher respondent had 0 to 1 year, and no respondents had 16+ years. Four respondents indicated that they have monthly team meeting time at Central, while two teachers reported they have weekly team meeting time and one respondent indicated that he or she rarely has team meeting time. Four teachers indicated that Tom attends team meetings with the teams or departments on a monthly basis, one indicated teams meet daily with him, one reported he meets weekly, and one respondent indicated that teams rarely meet with the principal.

Teachers were asked to give their opinions on how often they consistently discuss certain items as a team with their principal. Table 6 represents those results.

Table 6

*Topics Consistently Discussed with Principal—Central*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized testing processes</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher evaluation</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>80% (4)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student placement</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 6 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student concerns</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School improvement planning</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of all of the topics, three responding teachers indicated that they discussed curriculum “often,” which would mirror the information that Tom provided in his interview. However, the majority of respondents indicated that the topics on the survey were “sometimes” discussed. All responding teachers, five teachers, indicated that the topics of teacher evaluation and budget were “never” or “seldom” discussed with their principal.

Another section of the survey asked teachers to respond how often they consistently discussed inclusive topics with their principal. This information is provided in Table 7.

Table 7

*Topics Consistently Discussed with Principal—Central*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equity in education</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity in education</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in schools</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in schools</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for students</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of poverty</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 7 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As represented in Table 7, teachers were asked to indicate how often they had conversations with their principal about: equity in education, diversity in education, racism in schools, democracy in school, opportunities for students, parental involvement, community involvement, students of poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Out of these topics, parental involvement and opportunities for students ranked highest, but only two respondents indicated that they “frequently” discussed the topic with their principal. For all 13 topics, most ranked in the “seldom” or “sometimes” categories for the majority of respondents. Sexual orientation and religion ranked lowest with all five respondents indicating that they “never” or “seldom” discuss those items with their principal. These data would not support Tom’s discussion about sexual orientation as he indicated that he has had conversations with teachers about students with two moms. On the other hand, these data do suggest that Tom is having more conversations about parental involvement and community than the other topics listed.

Another section of the survey asked teachers “To what extent is/does your principal: encourage leadership, include participants in decision making in this school, advocate for inclusion, promote dialogue, emphasize student learning and classroom practice, encourage you to take risks, visible in building, and available to listen to others’ viewpoints.”
Table 8

**Inclusive Practices at Central**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does your principal:</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage leadership</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>50% (3)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>17% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include participants in decision-making in the school</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for inclusion</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote dialogue</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>17% (1)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>17% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize student learning and classroom practice</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>60% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage me to take risks</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>40% (2)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible in building</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>67% (4)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available to listen to others’ viewpoints</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>67% (4)</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 8 suggests, out of these topics, all six responding teachers reported that Tom is frequently visible in the building and available to listen to other’s viewpoints “often” or “frequently.” One respondent indicated that the principal “seldom” promotes dialogue, two said he “sometimes” promotes it, two said he “often promotes it,” and one said he “frequently” promotes it. These data suggest that Tom is visible and has an open door policy to listen to the teachers, but there is still some disconnect between the teacher’s perceptions about how often Tom promotes dialogue in the building.

Teachers were asked to give their opinion about the leadership style that best described their principal. Choices included managerial/technical (strong focus on the management/operations), humanistic (focus on the person), transformational (inspirational, charismatic leadership that focuses on school improvement), transformative (inclusive leadership processes which focus on social justice and equitable opportunities). Three teachers responded humanistic, and three responded transformational. Two respondents chose to skip the question.
My observations, interview data, and student focus group responses would suggest that teachers accurately represented Tom as a humanistic/transformational leader. In an open-ended response, a teacher suggested that Tom is “one of the most caring people she knows.”

Teachers provided information about the level of trust between the principal and themselves. In the teacher’s survey, no respondents indicated there is a low level of trust between the team and the principal, while the majority of teachers, five respondents, indicated there is a moderate level of trust. One teacher responded that an extremely high level of trust exists between Tom and his staff. These data suggest that there is a moderate level of trust between Tom and his staff; however, it is important to note that only five out of 18 teachers responded to the survey. In addition, through interviews, Tom did not discuss the importance of trust with his staff. Based on my interviews with Tom, and the fact that he focused on the importance of relationships when building community, I believe that Tom would say that trust is an important factor to consider when trying to create an inclusive school; however, it did not emerge as a topic throughout his interviews.

Teachers responded to how often they engage in inclusive practices at school. Topics included the following: calling home to parents for positive reasons, making selves available to community members, frequenting areas where colleagues, students, and parents gather outside of school building, going out into community to meet and visit with people, exchanging information with parents and community, employing surveys to collect information about the community’s beliefs, needs, and values, using newsletters, school newspapers, and meetings to get information out to community, and inviting parents and community groups into the school. Teachers were asked to respond by indicating never, seldom, sometimes, often, or frequently. Five teachers answered the question, and three skipped the question. Of the topics, the highest
ranked section came from 4 respondents, indicating they often or frequently made themselves available to community members. Next in rank was exchanging information with parents and community with all five responding teachers indicating they do so “often.” The lowest rank in the categories of “often” and “frequently” came from employing surveys to collect information (four teachers reported “seldom” and one reported “never”). These data suggest that teachers are engaging in dialogue with Tom about community involvement, but data would also suggest that the staff and Tom do not seek feedback from the community or parents through surveys as this was rated low for teachers and Tom did not discuss it during his interviews.

Teachers gave their feedback on students, parents, and teachers being involved in decision-making processes at their school. The majority of teachers responded “sometimes involved” for students and parents, and “frequently” or “sometimes” involved for teachers. Similarly, teachers were asked to give their response to the extent that students, parents, and have a voice into the school curriculum. Three respondents said that students “seldom” have a voice, two respondents said that they “never” have a voice, and 1 responding teacher said they “sometimes” have a voice. No respondents indicated that students “frequently” have a voice. As for parents, two teachers responded that parents “sometimes” have a voice, and four respondents said parents “seldom” or “never” have a voice into school curriculum. Similarly, the majority of responding teachers reported that they “seldom” have a voice into school curriculum, with three respondents indicating they seldom have a voice. Two responded that they “often” have a voice, and one responded “sometimes.” Having a voice into decision-making processes is a key component of an inclusive school. These data suggest that there are limited opportunities for students and parents to have a voice into decision-making, although teachers feel they “sometimes” have a voice.
One of the survey questions on the survey asked teachers, “To what extent do parents of historically minoritized (low income, visible minority) students have a represented voice in school curriculum, programs, and learning opportunities?” Teachers at Central responded in the following manner: frequent (no respondents); often (one respondent); sometimes (three respondents); seldom (two respondents); and never (no respondents). Similarly, teachers were asked an open-ended response to the following question: What structures are in place within the school for diverse and marginalized groups to be heard? Four teachers responded to this question. Two of the four reported “no formal structures” and “I don’t know.” Two others responded, “Our parents and students are heard. The staff listens to them, and we truly are a school community. Our principal is very approachable to students, parents, and staff. He sets an example for us all.” Another respondent indicated, “Translated materials are sent home at conferences and we have open invitations to functions.” These data suggest that there are some opportunities for minority parents to have a voice, but they also suggest that there are opportunities for improvement as well.

In the survey, teachers were asked to give their opinion on what the term “inclusive school environment” means to them. Six teachers responded to the open-ended question. Most responses included “all are welcome” or “including all students, parents, and teachers without regard to race, class.” Another respondent reported, “Students, parents, and teachers are equal, valuable members of our school community.” Based on these responses, it would appear that the responding teachers have a firm grasp on the overall idea of an inclusive school, although some of the inclusive practices appear to be missing.

Another open-ended question asked teachers to answer the following question: “How is dialogue used to provide opportunities for everyone’s voice to be heard?” Two teachers
responded to the question, and six teachers skipped the question. The two who responded indicated, “There is little dialogue in our school around these issues,” and the other reported, “I don’t know.” Data on this question suggest that dialogue may be missing in the school although data also suggest that teachers do not understand the term “dialogue” or the meaning behind it.

**Student Perceptions**

At Central, a student focus group was conducted with 3 students from Central. The interview was conducted in the principal’s office, but the principal was not present during the interview. The three students were all female. Two students were in 4th grade and one was in 5th grade. Students indicated that they want to grow up to be veterinarian/gymnastics coach, and the other two students reported that they wanted to be lawyers.

When asked to talk about their school, students reported that their school is “funner” than other schools because they “have more activities than other schools.” When asked to expand, students stated that they have “a ton of field trips, usually to museums.” These data suggest that students have many opportunities to attend rich, engaging field trips outside of the curriculum. Additionally, students spoke about their teachers and said, “Our teachers aren’t afraid to step out of the box and be crazy.” Another student shared, “They’re [Teachers are] really interactive with you and funny and nice.” Students also discussed their thoughts about learning in the classroom. One student reported, “Our teachers, they teach us games—and if you don’t know something, they go over the whole lesson. They just don’t give you a little preview.” These data appear to connect to Tom’s discussion about the importance of differentiation in the classroom. Students reporting that their teachers teach them in a variety of ways suggest that differentiation is occurring in the classrooms.
When asked about what the students do not like at school, the only thing they could respond to not liking was the food at lunch. On the other hand, students reported that they feel supported at school. One student shared that she goes to her teachers first if she needs help. She explained, “My teacher, he actually has this lesson in math about like when you grow up, how to not be tricked by prices—my teacher gives us lessons on how to be successful.”

Students were asked to respond about their dialogue with the school principal. Students reported that they “talk to him about their problems.” Students said that these conversations occur in their classrooms, hallways, before school, after school, and at lunch and recess. Additionally, students were asked to respond about ways in which they have dialogue in school. Students responded, “The teachers tell us what we’re learning. We don’t decide that.” This would correlate with the teachers’ responses about students have a voice into the curriculum and how they “rarely” do. However, one student reported that she feels “that they [students] do have a voice at school. We have an opinion on what we want to do.” When asked how they share opinions about what they want at school, students reported that they talk to their principal and teachers about their ideas. They gave specific examples about how they can come up with field trip ideas or club and activity ideas. Students said that they felt they “did have a voice” about school itself, but not about the curriculum and what is being taught. They felt that should come from the teacher.

Parent involvement was discussed with students. Students at Central report about the “Walk for Central” program and reported that parents help with the program for the community. All three students said that the program earns money for their school. They also reported that there is a PTA at the school and they “see parents a lot in the building.” These data would support Tom’s discussion about involving parents and how he opens his door to all parents.
Students also talked about their involvement within the community. One student spoke about the “Green Club” and how students go outside of the school to pick up garbage to keep their community clean. Another student remembered a time that “we would go visit old people just to get a smile on their faces.” Again, these data would appear to show that students at Central have a connection outside of the school building to a larger context of the community at large.

All three students believed that they are successful at school. They attributed their success to their teachers mostly. When asked about their friends and if they are successful as well, students reported that some of their friends are “much smarter” than they are. When asked if they hang out with friends that look like them, one student responded, “No, we don’t look alike. My friend Sarah, she looks way different than me. She’s from Israel. And my best friend, she’s really nice. She has two moms, so she doesn’t know what it’s like to have a dad.” When asked for a final thought about their school, one student responded, “It is a great place. It’s really easy to learn here.” These data suggest an inclusive environment as students appear to be friends with a variety of people, and they seem to be inclusive about others’ family orientation.

Overall, it would appear based on data through interviews, teacher survey results, student focus group data, and observations that Tom is striving to create an inclusive school through dialogic relations. As I view dialogue from an ontological perspective, it would appear that Tom’s beliefs about inclusive schooling are grounded in principles of openness and understanding, but there are pieces of evidence to suggest that dialogue is lacking in some areas at Central.
Pride Elementary School: Making It Happen

*We have been a very, very successful team here at Pride because of our inclusiveness.*
*(Elizabeth Ellington, Pride Elementary School Principal)*

**School Background**

Pride Elementary School, located in the outskirts of a large city in a Midwestern state, houses approximately 200 first through fourth grade students. The district itself is comprised of five schools and has an enrollment of approximately 1,100 students. Pride Elementary School’s student demographics are represented below.

- Enrollment: 205
- White: 1%
- Black: 91%
- Hispanic: 6%
- Asian: 0%
- Multiracial: 2%
- Mobility: 42%
- Low-income: 95%

At Pride, 95% of the school’s families are from a low-income background, the mobility rate is 42%, the attendance rate is 94%, and there is 96% parental contact as reported on the state report card. Demographically, 53% of the district’s teachers are Caucasian and 47% are African American.

Academically, Pride Elementary School’s state standardized achievement scores have improved 53 percentage points over a 6 year span, from 27% of students meeting and exceeding state standards in 2004 to 80% of students meeting and exceeding standards in 2010. Additionally, Pride Elementary School made Adequate Yearly Progress in the 2010 school year. Due to its academic progress, Pride has earned the state’s ‘Spotlight School’ recognition, which honors high poverty, high performing schools which excel in closing the achievement gap. Pride has also earned the state’s Academic Improvement Award, which recognizes schools that have
sustained an upward trend in test scores for at least two years and showed a 7.5 point increase over the prior year or a 15 point increase over the prior two years.

Utilizing two principal interviews, one teacher survey, one student focus group, and two team meeting observations, this story follows Elizabeth Ellington’s journey in creating an inclusive school community at Pride Elementary School.

**Principal Background**

As I walked into Pride Elementary School, I felt the leadership of Elizabeth Ellington. I was quickly greeted by her secretary, who welcomed me and then asked me to have a seat. The secretary said, “Mrs. Ellington has been expecting you.” As I looked around the office, my eyes were drawn to the “Pride Creed” prominently posted on the wall, and I noticed that Mrs. Ellington was in her office with a student. The main office was small, yet large enough for teachers to come in and out frequently. As teachers enter the office, they made eye contact with me and said, “Good morning, Mrs. Orzel.” At that point, I was wondering how they knew me.

Within minutes, Mrs. Ellington opened her door and a student came out with her. He looked at me, stuck out his hand, and said, “Welcome to Pride, Mrs. Orzel.” Taken aback by his welcome, I responded, “Thank you,” and I shook his hand. Mrs. Ellington looked at the student and said, “Remember our conversation.” He responded, “Yes, ma’am.” And he left the office.

I was struck by Mrs. Ellington’s presence. With 25 years of experience, Mrs. Ellington looked young, yet she had a confidence and a professional air about her. She welcomed me and asked me to come in her office. As I looked around her office, I noticed that, although it was small, it was clean, organized, and had several family photos and artifacts of student work hung around the room. Her computer was placed behind her, which gave her an opportunity to talk freely with me.
As we began, Mrs. Ellington got right to the point and asked me how I selected her school for the study. After I explained, I observed that she appeared to be more relaxed and open to having the conversation with me as she told me that “many people want to come here to see what we’re doing, yet they never say how they selected us. Teachers wonder and I want them to know what you’re here for and why you’re here, because you will soon see that they know who you are and why you’re here, but I want to know—why us? Why were we selected?” And at that point, I knew how the secretary knew me when I walked in, how the teachers knew my name, and how the student knew—everything in the building focused on communication, understanding—and dialogue.

For the purposes of this section, I refer to Elizabeth Ellington as Mrs. Ellington. In the other sections, I referred to the principals on a first-name basis as we communicated throughout the process in that fashion. However, with Mrs. Ellington, she referred to me as Mrs. Orzel throughout the process, and I noticed within the first five minutes of my time at Pride that everyone in the building, whether students were present or not, always called Elizabeth, Mrs. Ellington. Thus, for the purposes of this section and to give the proper respect to the participant, I will be referring to Elizabeth as Mrs. Ellington.

Creating an Inclusive School

There is “no typical day” for Mrs. Ellington at Pride Elementary School. However, there were a few constants in her routine as a principal. For example, she arrived early and greeted every student as they entered the school grounds. When the day began, she addressed the entire school and they reflected together as a staff and student body on what kind of day they wanted to have together, how they felt about something at school, and what they would like to see happen at school. In addition, each day Mrs. Ellington surprised her students with a positive reward for
their behavior. She stated, “Every day they [students] are expecting to have good behavior because Mrs. Ellington will reward them—whether it’s 10 minutes extra recess, end of the day game time. . . . I’ll just announce if I have not received any office referrals.” From there, Mrs. Ellington talked about behavior expectations, but she also addressed academics throughout her typical day. “I do walkthroughs starting at 8:15. And my walkthroughs consist of listening for fluency. . . . So I walk in to listen to every classroom doing something in fluency whether it’s reader’s theatre or something else.” And, after she stopped into the office to check her emails for any parents who might have contacted her, she was back into the building by 9:30 conducting walkthroughs. “Every week someone is being observed, whether it’s for observation purposes, or just because it’s your day today.” At the end of day’s dismissal, she said goodbye to every student and “we all, the entire school, we dismiss together.”

The notion of teamwork was a central focal point of Mrs. Ellington’s conversation with me. When asked to define what an inclusive school community meant to her, Mrs. Ellington stated:

*For me, an inclusive school environment means that the whole school is on board with whatever is going on in the school. We as a team make decision. . . . I don’t make decisions in isolation. Inclusive to me is including in every aspect of the school day and what happens here at Pride.*

These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington believes in open communication and giving a voice to everyone in the community. As previously stated, Pride Elementary School is predominantly comprised of low-income families and is predominantly African American. Because of the school’s demographics, Pride receives state funding to provide support to students in the areas of reading and math. When Mrs. Ellington spoke about her school, she shared information about the reading specialist services and the math tutoring students receive. And with that, she also discussed the dance club, fine arts club, drama club, and physics club as well. Elizabeth
expressed that it is critical to have a well-rounded education filled with high expectations and opportunities for all students. These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington understood the importance of providing a rich, diverse curriculum for all students and does not only drill and kill the subjects of math and reading. In the next section, I will provide information from Mrs. Ellington about challenges faced and strategies used when trying to create an inclusive school at Pride.

**Challenges and Strategies to Creating an Inclusive School**

Mrs. Ellington indicated that biggest challenge when trying to create an inclusive school comes from people breaking down their barriers and building trust. Simply stated, “Having the confidence of trust is the key to open dialogue.” Similarly, Mrs. Ellington suggested that a major challenge is to make everyone feel that they have a voice. “From custodians to teachers to secretaries—everyone should have a voice.” Providing a voice to everyone in the community appeared to be a major focus for Mrs. Ellington and supports an inclusive approach. To that end, while Mrs. Ellington discussed the challenges, she quickly provided strategies throughout our interview.

In order to create an inclusive school, Mrs. Ellington suggested that principals must build relationships with everyone in the school community, starting with the students. She stated, “The kids feel loved. I greet my children every morning with a hug. Sometimes I can’t get in the building because it’s hug here, group hug, conversations. They [Students] want to tell me things.” The relationship goes beyond the school doors for Mrs. Ellington when she stated:

*If they’re [students] being bullied, even if that’s at school or at home, they know they can come here and tell me about it. They know I am going to do something about it, so I think they feel very secure. It’s consistent. They know they can stay as late as they would like to stay to get homework done. They know I’m going to be here to listen to whatever problems they have. It is an open door policy. That policy is not just for students and parents—it also is consistent for teachers.*
Thus, Mrs. Ellington talked about the importance of listening and understanding, and did not focus on only students and parents—she also included the importance of her teachers as well. She furthered that idea and suggested, “Teachers know that if they [students or teachers] ask to see me, that they [secretaries] must give them permission to come to the office to see me. There’s no, ‘She’s busy.’ I just think they know that there’s someone here that cares for them and will listen to them.” To that point, listening to others is a critical component when trying to create an inclusive community. Based on these data, Mrs. Ellington appeared to understand the importance of the exchange of communication to reach a deeper understanding for all perspectives and people engaging in dialogue.

Another strategy that Mrs. Ellington shared that builds an inclusive community is the notion of honesty. She asserted:

_The first thing I implemented is that I have no secrets. They [Teachers] know that if something is going on, they will know about it. I will tell them. If we have a weak link on our team, then we have it, we own it, and they need to know we have it. And, the weak link needs to know that everybody’s going to know about it. And, we’re going to do that best that we can to help them get better. I always tell my staff, my headaches are your headaches. My problems are your problems. I think because of that, the teachers actually feel ownership to things that are going on here._

This type of open dialogue provided an opportunity for everyone to be heard. The honest perspective appeared to be deeply respected by Mrs. Ellington’s staff, as majority of them indicated there is a high level of trust between teachers and principal.

Getting to know parents was a critical strategy for Mrs. Ellington. Pride Elementary School is predominantly African American; however, Mrs. Ellington wanted every individual parent to feel welcome regardless of their background or ethnicity. At Pride, the visible minority students are Caucasian and Hispanic, and Mrs. Ellington talked about recruiting these parents to feel part of the community. As an example, communication in Spanish was sent home regularly and bilingual interpreters were on hand whenever needed. She suggested:
I open my door to actually recruiting my Caucasian parents and my Hispanic parents because sometimes they have a tendency to shy away a little bit because they think because we are predominantly African American school that we only want African American participation and that’s not the case. So, I actually get on the phone. My parents know me personally. My Caucasian parents fit right in. We only have two or three of them and we call them our ‘soul sisters and brothers.’ They feel very much at home here, and their children do too.”

These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington provided spaces and opportunities for all parents to be a part of Pride. As evidenced by her interview, Mrs. Ellington produced proactive communication to engage every parent in her school. She did not believe in the idea that we open our doors to parents through Open House and Parent Conferences, so if parents do not attend, then they must not care. Rather, Mrs. Ellington practiced proactive communication, engaging all parents into the community.

Inclusivity was part of Pride whether it was through race, ethnicity, income status, or academic ability. As an example, special education services were provided within the general education setting and services were in a push-in model. Mrs. Ellington shared what one morning might look like for special education students and said, “We do the fluency walk every morning, and on Fridays, all students, including those with special education services, all walk to a different classroom and they participate with a new homeroom classroom to do their Reader’s Theatre.” She continued to discuss her philosophy about inclusiveness for students with disabilities and said, “We provide a service for our students with disabilities. We do not provide a placement for them. Rather, we provide a service.” These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington understood the importance of inclusion from a special education perspective, but that she also wanted students with disabilities to be held to a high academic and social standard as well.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue is at the heart of the work that Mrs. Ellington created at Pride Elementary School. As an example, Mrs. Ellington suggested that she uses conversation to talk about how
she feels, what her vision is, what the expectations are for the school, instructional discussions, feedback about students—virtually any situation that comes along—and that dialogue allowed her to gain a better understanding of others’ wants, needs, feelings, and emotions. She also indicated dialogue enables her to get feedback from teachers and staff about how they feel about issues they face in the school. In fact, Mrs. Ellington claimed, “Dialogue is the key to success.”

In order to create an environment focused on dialogue, Mrs. Ellington indicated she was purposeful about how she structured meetings and agendas. As an example, staff meetings have a “very relaxed atmosphere.” Regardless of the significance of the topic, the atmosphere mattered to Mrs. Ellington. She used an example about talking about the displacement of a teacher and how uncomfortable that discussion might be for a group of staff members. Yet, she indicated, “It is critical to dialogue,” and “we have created an atmosphere that we can talk to each other because it is based on trust.” To that end, Mrs. Ellington shared that she strategically positioned herself in the middle of the room during meetings and “never at the head of the table” to avoid power imbalances.

Additionally, topics and agendas were set both by the principal and by teachers in a collaborative model. As Mrs. Ellington stated, “We start talking about a topic and we don’t move on until we have all had our opportunity to speak and come to a consensus.” These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington believes dialogue is who and what she is, which would show an ontological perspective.

When asked if dialogue can make a difference in her work as a principal, Mrs. Ellington quickly responded, “Not can, it does. It does make a difference.” She then shared her thoughts on the amount of dialogue that is necessary to create an inclusive school, and she posited, “How much dialogue is necessary? Well, as much as necessary for all parties to come to an
understanding about everyone’s perspectives.” Yet, she was quick to also offer that not enough dialogue exists in schools today. When asked why that might be the case, she responded:

“I’ve sat in on millions of meetings, and I don’t think the trust factor or the value factor is prevalent. And so therefore, I think there is some reticence on people’s parts on partaking in dialogue because you don’t really know how it’s going to be received . . . I think that people have a hesitancy to step outside of what they feel to be their comfort zone and give their true opinions about things. I don’t think the trust factor has been established, and that’s why there is not enough dialogue going on. I think people are very hesitant to stand behind something that might be controversial—that might not be what someone else might want to hear.

These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington puts a great deal of emphasis on trust within her school. It appeared that Mrs. Ellington does not fear having difficult conversations with other people in the community.

Mrs. Ellington was asked if time constraints could be considered a factor to a lack of dialogue in schools. She quickly responded, “No, I really don’t. It is all about trust and confidence and how you feel you are going to be viewed and valued.” Again, data suggest that Mrs. Ellington does not feel time is a factor; instead, she suggested that a lack of dialogue was attributed to a lack of trust and value of another person or people, which again would view dialogue as ontological.

**Teacher Perceptions**

An online survey was e-mailed by Mrs. Ellington to the teachers at Pride Elementary. Out of 15 teachers at Pride, 11 responded to the survey. Seven respondents are teachers with two to five years of experience, one respondent has 11-15 years of experience, three respondents have six to 10 years, and no respondents have 16+ years of experience. A large majority of respondents, 10 teachers, indicate that they have weekly team meeting time at Pride, and 10 responding teachers indicate that Mrs. Ellington attends team meetings with the teams or
departments on a weekly basis. These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington regularly attends meetings with the teachers and therefore, makes the time in her schedule to do so.

Teachers were asked to give their opinions on how often they consistently discuss certain items as a team with their principal. Table 9 represents the results.

Table 9

*Topics Consistently Discussed with Principal—Pride*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>100% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized testing processes</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>91% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher evaluation</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td>56% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>56% (5)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>40% (4)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>50% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student placement</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>30% (3)</td>
<td>60% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>82% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td>64% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>91% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>100% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student concerns</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>82% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>46% (5)</td>
<td>27% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School improvement planning</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>50% (5)</td>
<td>40% (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of all of the topics, assessment and test scores were rated the highest response with 11 respondents indicating they “frequently” discuss with the principal. Similarly, standardized testing processes and instruction were rated as topics that are often or frequently discussed. On the whole, out of the list of 13 topics to rank as discussion items with the principal, there was only one topic, budget, that five respondents indicated that they never discuss. The other topics were all rated as topics of discussion on an often or frequent basis. These data support Mrs.
Ellington’s interview data to suggest that there is a consistent dialogue about a variety of topics in the school.

Another section of the survey asked teachers to respond how often they consistently discussed inclusive topics in education. Table 10 represents the results.

Table 10

*Topics Consistently Discussed with Principal—Pride*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equity in education</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td><strong>33% (3)</strong></td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
<td><strong>33% (3)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity in education</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td><strong>30% (3)</strong></td>
<td><strong>30% (3)</strong></td>
<td><strong>30% (3)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in schools</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td><strong>50% (5)</strong></td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in schools</td>
<td>20% (1)</td>
<td><strong>40% (4)</strong></td>
<td>30% (3)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for students</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>40% (4)</td>
<td><strong>50% (5)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>44% (4)</td>
<td><strong>56% (5)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td><strong>56% (5)</strong></td>
<td>44% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of poverty</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td><strong>30% (3)</strong></td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td><strong>30% (3)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td><strong>33% (3)</strong></td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td><strong>50% (5)</strong></td>
<td>40% (4)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td><strong>33% (3)</strong></td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
<td>11% (1)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td><strong>40% (4)</strong></td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td><strong>60% (6)</strong></td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of these topics, parental involvement and community involvement ranked highest with 9 respondents indicating that they “often” or “frequently” discussed the topic with their principal. Opportunities for students and diversity in education were next, and topics of sexual orientation and religion ranked last with only one respondent indicating that he or she “frequently” discusses the topic with the principal. These data suggest that conversations are
occurring on a frequent basis about parents and community. Data would also align with Mrs. Ellington’s description of the dialogue that occurs in the school.

Another section of the survey asked teachers to give feedback about inclusive practices at Pride. Table 11 represents the results of that survey question.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusive Practices at Pride</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To What Extent Does Your Principal:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include participants in decision-making in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize student learning and classroom practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage me to take risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible in building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available to listen to others’ viewpoints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of these topics, 10 of Mrs. Ellington’s teachers responded that she is frequently visible in the building and emphasizes classroom learning and practice. It is important to note that out of all eight of these topics, 100% of Elizabeth’s teachers, or all 10 respondents, said she does each of these items often or frequently. Thus, data suggest that Mrs. Ellington is visible in the building on a regular basis, which would support her discussion about her visibility. In addition, based on the responses from these respondents, it appears that Mrs. Ellington does these items consistently since the majority of her teachers responded similarly, and therefore, it
suggests that Mrs. Ellington’s teachers who responded believe that she frequently employs these inclusive practices as a principal.

Teachers were asked to give their opinion about the leadership style that best described their principal. Choices included managerial/technical (strong focus on the management/operations), humanistic (focus on the person), transformational (inspirational, charismatic leadership that focuses on school improvement), transformative (inclusive leadership processes which focus on social justice and equitable opportunities). Five teachers responded transformational, two teachers responded managerial/technical, one responded humanistic, and one responded transformative. Two respondents chose to skip the question. Data suggest that teachers who responded have mixed reaction to identifying Mrs. Ellington’s leadership style. While the majority indicated transformational, others responded managerial and humanistic. Variance of responses could indicate that Mrs. Ellington shows examples of several styles within her leadership.

Trust within the school community is a topic that Mrs. Ellington stressed quite often during her interviews. In the teacher’s survey, no respondents indicated there is a low level of trust between the team and the principal, two respondents indicated there is a moderate level of trust, and the majority of respondents, 8 teachers, responded that an extremely high level of trust exists between Mrs. Ellington and her staff. Trust was a topic that Mrs. Ellington discussed at length during her interview. Data suggest that teachers feel there is a high level of trust between themselves and Mrs. Ellington and the majority responded as such, so it appears that Mrs. Ellington’s conversations are creating an environment where teachers feel trust.

Teachers were asked to respond how often they engage in inclusive practices at school. Topics included the following: calling home to parents for positive reasons, making selves
available to community members, frequenting areas where colleagues, students, and parents gather outside of school building, going out into community to meet and visit with people, exchanging information with parents and community, employing surveys to collect information about the community’s beliefs, needs, and values, using newsletters, school newspapers, and meetings to get information out to community, and inviting parents and community groups into the school. Teachers were asked to respond by indicating never, seldom, sometimes, often, or frequently. Ten teachers answered the question, and one skipped the question. Of the topics, the highest ranked section came from seven respondents, indicating they often or frequently made themselves available to community members. Next in rank was inviting parents and community groups into the school with seven teachers indicating they do so “often” or “frequently.” The lowest rank in the categories of “often” and “frequently” came from going into community to visit with people (five responded often or frequently) and employing surveys to collect information about community’s needs, beliefs, and values (one responded “often”). These data suggest that teachers often engage in inclusive practices within the context of their positions, which would also support the examples provided in Mrs. Ellington’s interviews.

Teachers were asked to give their feedback on students, parents, and teachers being involved in decision-making processes at their school. The majority of teachers, 7, responded “sometimes involved” for students and parents, and 10 responded “frequently” or “often” involved for teachers. Similarly, teachers were asked to give their response to the extent that students, parents, and have a voice into the school curriculum. Three respondents said that students “seldom” have a voice, four said that they “sometimes” or “often” have a voice, and three said they “never” have a voice. No respondents indicated that students “frequently” have a voice. As for parents, two teachers responded that parents “sometimes” have a voice, and six
respondents said parents “seldom” or “never” have a voice into school curriculum. On the other hand, the majority of teachers responded that they “frequently” have a voice into school curriculum, with four respondents indicating they frequently have a voice. Three responded that they “often” have a voice, three responded “sometimes,” and zero responded “seldom” or “never.” These data suggest that responding teachers believe that they have a voice into the school’s decision-making processes, which would support the examples that Mrs. Ellington provided in her interviews. However, teachers who took the survey responded that parents and students do not as much decision making power as they do.

One of the survey questions on the survey asked teachers, “To what extent do parents of historically minoritized (low income, visible minority) students have a represented voice in school curriculum, programs, and learning opportunities?” Teachers at Pride responded in the following manner: frequent (1); often (1); sometimes (4); seldom (2); and never (2). Data suggest that minoritized parents do not have a represented voice, which does not correlate with Mrs. Ellington’s interviews. Additionally, teachers were asked an open-ended response to the following question: What structures are in place within the school for diverse and marginalized groups to be heard? Only three teachers responded to this question and all responded, “None that I know of.” These data suggest that there are no structures in place for marginalized groups or that teachers are unaware of the structures. It could also be possible that because the school is predominantly African American that teachers were confused about the question as minority students are the majority at Pride.

In the survey, teachers were asked to give their opinion on what the term “inclusive school environment” means to them. Eight teachers responded to the open-ended question. Most responses included “involvement by all” or “including all in the community.” One response
indicated that students with disabilities should be integrated and mainstreamed into the school system. One response included differentiated instruction. Data suggest that the majority of Pride teachers who responded have a general sense of the term, inclusive school.

Another open-ended question asked teachers to answer the following question: “How is dialogue used to provide opportunities for everyone’s voice to be heard?” Four teachers responded to the question. Some teachers discussed school newsletters, transition meetings, grade level meetings, staff meetings, field trip opportunities and after school functions. Another response indicated:

*We use many forms of dialogue with teachers, ancillary staff, students, parents, community, and volunteers. (i.e. staff meetings, PTO, memos, phone calls, parent message book, email). In particular, my parents have my cell number and are able to call me at anytime, including evenings and weekends.*

These data suggest that there is an open dialogue between teachers and parents and between principal and teachers. It would correlate with Mrs. Ellington’s interviews to suggest that Pride has elements of dialogue that support an inclusive community.

**Student Perceptions**

A focus group was conducted at Pride Elementary School with five students. Three of the students were female and two were male. All of the students are in 4th grade. The students and I met in a classroom. I believe that the students were forthright and honest with all of their comments because of their enthusiasm and because they said at one point, “We are telling you what we know to be the truth!”

First, students were asked to tell about themselves including their age, grade, what classes they enjoyed at school, what activities that they were a part of outside of school, and what they wanted to be when they grow up. Their responses included a football or basketball player, an artist or a fashion designer, a surgeon, a singer, and an artist. When asked to tell about their
school, the first student who responded said, “I have been in this school for almost 6 years. I have a great teacher and a great principal. I really like this school.” Another student quickly responded, “Our school is very cheerful. We do lots of activities.” Another student shared that one thing she likes about school is the expectations and welcoming environment. She stated:

Our school is determined to make us what we want to be, educate us. So when I be at home and I be thinking about school it’s like, man, I want to go back to school. Then I say, I don’t want to go back home—I want to stay here.

These data would support Mrs. Ellington’s interview where she said that “teachers don’t want to leave and students don’t want to leave.” Students appeared to have a strong sense of pride and connection to their school.

When asked what the best thing about their school is, students responded that they have “smart teachers who help them” and “every teacher is trying to get us something good in life.” Three other students spoke about the activities at school and how much they enjoyed them. They mentioned softball, the Fine Arts fair, Green Day, Valentine’s Ball, plays, dance club, art, specials classes, and outside recess. No students could express what they did not like about the school and one student included that “we don’t want negative people in our school.” These data supported Mrs. Ellington’s emphasis on a well-rounded education and exposure to reading, math, science, social studies, and fine arts. Providing opportunities for all students to participate in a variety of activities suggests inclusive practices.

To these students, their success was a direct result of the principal and teachers. “If I have trouble, I go straight to my teacher or Mrs. Ellington. They help me be successful,” one student responded. In fact, every student in the group indicated that if they have a problem, they go directly to the principal or to a teacher for help. One student claimed, “I go to the principal ‘cause she likes to talk—a lot.” When asked what they talk about with the principal, students said that they feel comfortable talking about their lives, school, and family problems with her. They
stated that they spoke to her before school starts, during school, during lunch and recess and after school. Students also indicated that they asked her for advice on a regular basis. Another student shared that if there was a problem between students that they “tell the principal and she will settle it.” When asked how she “settles it,” the students claimed, “She’ll go and have all of us go into her conference room and we’ll all talk about it together.” Data suggest that dialogue exists between the principal and her students and that the dialogue provides opportunities for students to have a voice and for students to come to an understanding about each other.

The students at Pride shared that they have a deep and profound love for their school. Each of the students who were interviewed claimed that they did not want to leave to go to another school. One student said, “I don’t really want to go to another school because I’ll miss my principal and my teachers.” Another student supported that claim and stated, “When I first went to this school, I felt shy. Now I don’t even want to leave.” Another shared, “I want to stay in my own school. I think my school is successful and it’s very—how can I say it? Determined.” These comments suggested that the climate and culture of the school is supportive and supported Mrs. Ellington’s interview about how children love their school.

When asked what these students would tell other students about their school, one student quickly commented, “I would tell them that I’ve been here six years and it’s been the best six years of my life.” Another said, “I would tell them that we’re the best. It is the best school.” Continuing the support of the school, another student stated, “There are rules here. We have Pride Basics. It’s be respectful, be safe, be responsible. Be here, be ready. We have to follow those rules because that’s how you become an educated and talented person and successful.” These data support Mrs. Ellington’s interviews that indicated the “Pride Way.” Information provided from the focus group shed light onto an environment that has high expectations for
academics and behavior, yet it also suggested that students have opportunities to have a voice into their experiences.

Overall, based on interviews, focus group data, teacher survey data, and observations, it appears that Pride School is an inclusive environment as measured by the literature surrounding inclusive schools. Pride Elementary is a high poverty, high minority school which is making Adequate Yearly Progress. Despite challenges associated with high poverty and minority students, Pride is making progress academically. Based on data acquired, it seems that dialogic relations by the principal have had a positive and direct impact on the success of the school and have created opportunities for an inclusive environment to exist.

In conclusion, it appears that Mrs. Ellington has an understanding of dialogue in an ontological sense and views dialogue as a foundation, or as a way of life. Additionally, students and teachers also report that dialogue is a part of their daily life at Pride. Thus, these data suggest that a strong relationship exists between dialogue and inclusive schools.

Now that each school has been analyzed individually, Chapter 5 will provide a cross-case analysis of all three schools.
Chapter 5
Insights From the Data

I began this study because of my own experiences as a school administrator trying to create an inclusive school environment. As a doctoral student exposed to notions of dialogue and community, my interest was piqued to try to better understand how school leaders could create spaces for dialogue in schools to create inclusive schools. Therefore, I began to wonder how dialogue could be a foundation to creating equitable, accessible learning environments for all stakeholders in a community.

Informed by my personal experience as a school leader and by a conceptual framework focused on dialogic relations (Shields & Edwards, 2005), and supplemented by the literature on dialogue, community, and inclusive leadership, I set out to examine and understand the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools. I wished to learn if there was a relationship between how leaders used dialogue and the creation of inclusive community within their schools.

My specific research questions were:

1. What is the relationship between dialogue and an inclusive school community?
2. What is the principal’s conception of an inclusive community?
3. What is the role of dialogue in creating an inclusive community?
4. What challenges does a principal face when trying to create an inclusive community and how may they be overcome?

In this chapter, I draw on my data to answer these four questions. In the previous chapter, I have told the stories of each principal’s journey to create an inclusive school. This chapter will provide a cross-case analysis, guided by the research questions, which shed light onto common themes and patterns that emerged from the data collection process. Keeping my research questions in mind, I will discuss the principals’ conceptions of what an inclusive school
environment is, the challenges they face when trying to create an inclusive school, the strategies they use to create inclusive schools, the role of dialogue when creating an inclusive school, and I will also present emerging themes from the data collection.

**Principals’ Background and School Overview**

All three principals are within a K-8 setting. As Table 12 indicates, 2 principals are male and one is female, and all principals have been the leader at their respective schools for at least 3 years. One principal, Tom, has been the principal at Central for 10 years. Two principals are leaders of elementary buildings and 1 principal is a middle school principal.

Table 12

*Overview of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Site and grade level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yrs. as principal @ site</th>
<th>Total yrs. experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Kingsworth Middle School (7-8)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Central Elementary School (K-5)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Pride Elementary School (1-4)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to share the grade level, gender, and years of experience as principal for several reasons. First, this study sought to examine the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools from K-8, elementary level settings. As evidenced by the schools selected for the study, there are two elementary and one middle school. The expert panel had a difficult time identifying “inclusive” middle school principals, so only one middle school was chosen for the study. Previous data suggest that the middle school is not as inclusive as the other two elementary schools studied.
Gender is important to note, although gender was not a central focus for the study. While two of the principals selected were men, it appears that the woman in the study was observed by interviews, observations, and survey feedback to be the most inclusive principal studied. Finally, years of experience are important to observe. Two of the principals, Elizabeth Ellington and Alan Jacobs had only three years of experience as a principal at the study site; however, Tom has been principal at Central for 10 years. And, while Mrs. Ellington only has three years as principal of Pride, she has 25 years of experience total, which would make her the most experienced of all three principals. Also, Alan, who appears to be having the greatest challenge with dialogue and inclusive schools, has the least amount of experience, 14 years in education. It is important to note that years of experience, although not a central focus for this study, could impact the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools.

As Table 13 indicates, each school within the study has a high minority population and a high population of students from low-income family backgrounds. As represented in the chart, the mobility rate at Central Elementary at 8% is considerably lower than the other two schools in the study; however, Kingsworth’s mobility rate is 21% and Pride’s is 42%. Enrollment for the schools ranges from the lowest at Pride with 205 students and the highest at Kingsworth with 697 students.

Table 13

Overview of Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>% Hispanic</th>
<th>% Asian</th>
<th>% Multiracial</th>
<th>% Mobility</th>
<th>Low-income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kingsworth MS</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Elementary</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride Elementary</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These data are important to note at this point in the study. Demographically, all schools can be considered “diverse” because of their large numbers of minority students. Also, mobility is important to note because it addresses the point that students may enroll and transfer out of the school in some schools more than others. According to the data, Central has the lowest mobility rate, at only 8%. Next is Kingsworth Middle School, with a 21% mobility rate. Finally, Pride’s mobility rate is the highest at 42%. These numbers are important to note because lack of student achievement is often “blamed” on students transferring into and out of the system. Yet, Pride, with the highest mobility, also has the highest achievement of all three schools in the study, the greatest sense of inclusivity and apparently the most emphasis on dialogue.

Finally, students from a low-income background are often viewed as “challenges” to the system because they do not come to the educational table with the same advantages as their middle to upper class peers. However, it is important to note that in this study, all 3 schools have a high population of students from a low-income background. In fact, Pride has a 95% low-income population, yet they have the highest achievement of all 3 schools and have been selected as a spotlight school in their state. These data would suggest that Pride School is “defying all odds” and creating an inclusive school since data suggest that dialogue is a foundation of the school and there appears to be a strong relationship between dialogue and inclusive school practices.

Creating an Inclusive School

Alan, Tom, and Mrs. Ellington were individually asked to provide insights into the first research question of the study which asked about their view of what the term “inclusive community” meant to them in their work as a principal. In all of their responses, they included
the notion that “all” or “everyone in the community” should be involved in the educational processes at school. However, one principal, Alan, focused more on the special education aspect of inclusive schools. In his interview, he shared:

*A large population of our students, larger than I am used to, are special education students. I have found through data and through looking at information from the lower graders, primarily our special ed., especially our ED, are African American boys. Those students that were not reached in second, third, or fourth grade and they were kind of disruptive in class, and they were identified as special ed. instead of really getting to the root of the problem which was different learning styles, mentoring—all of those other things that come into play.*

As previously indicated, some leaders associate inclusive schools with the notion of “inclusion” or special education. While Alan responded about students with disabilities when he was speaking about inclusive schools, he took a broader approach to the idea and included the importance of understanding the “root of the problem” instead of a focus on special education.

Similarly, all principals discussed the importance of access and opportunities for students when defining an inclusive school community. As an example, Alan discussed the importance of teachers understanding that students are “intimidated” by the school system and therefore may not seek teacher assistance. He stated, “For a student to learn, we take for granted that as teacher we may say, “Well that kid can come and talk to me at anytime.’ Well, that’s not true. They’re [Students are] intimidated.” In his definition of an inclusive school, he also discussed the importance of providing access to students and not limiting their curricular opportunities. He spoke of high standards and extra support for students. He suggested, “We’re not lowering our expectations, we’re giving kids extra tools to help them reach expectations. That is difficult for some teachers to grasp. You’re not teaching math—you’re teaching the student.”

Like Alan, Tom also discussed the importance of challenging teachers to meet the needs of every student in the building. When he discussed what an inclusive school community is he stated:
It’s so easy for teachers to say, oh those are ESL students and I don’t have to worry about them. But when I do evaluations, I ask them how they meet the needs of their ESL students. I ask about their goals and how teachers are meeting them. I feel like that’s a cop out to push it off onto the ESL teacher.

While Alan discussed the need to teach the child and not the subject, Tom also recommended that dialogue about culturally responsive pedagogy is critical when defining an inclusive school community. He suggested, “Talking about culturally responsive curriculum is not another layer, but something we can do to the current curriculum to enhance an inclusive environment for all students.” Finally, Tom defined an inclusive school environment as one in which “we don’t place blame on the students or parents.”

Mrs. Ellington shared similar thoughts when defining an inclusive environment. Like Alan and Tom, she stressed the importance of the whole child and how she reaches out to her parent community. However, in her definition of an inclusive school, Mrs. Ellington put the most emphasis on the importance of teamwork. She stated, “The Pride Way is through teamwork. We do it through respect. We do it through nurturing our students.” Throughout her interview, and specifically when speaking about an inclusive school, Elizabeth focused her conversation about the importance of teamwork. She also stressed the importance of focusing on more than only reading and math. She stressed, “Our focus is on ALL of it—reading, math, science, social studies, and fine arts.”

Tracking was also discussed by two of the three principals when discussing the definition of inclusive school environments. Tracking refers to grouping students together for the purposes of teaching them at a certain academic level. In other words, gifted students taking the same courses together as a group would be considered a track. Or, placing students who struggle in reading and placing them together in one classroom all day would be another form of a track. Mrs. Ellington stated:
We do a lot of assessments. I don’t track. I don’t like that term, tracking, because we don’t track. What we do is, we use our data to drive our instruction. It will drive small groups. It will drive how we deal with our strategic students and our intensive students. I don’t like to say tracking. Tracking is a placement.

Similar to Mrs. Ellington’s idea of tracking, Alan simply stated, “We’re trying to destroy the tracks.” Both principals emphasized how they believe tracking students creates inequities for marginalized students which would support the notion that they are creating an inclusive school. Tom did not speak about tracking during any of his interviews.

Thus, it appears that all three principals understand the concept of an inclusive school, but Mrs. Ellington’s definition encompassed more of the literature surrounding inclusive schools to include the importance of a well-rounded curriculum and equitable exposure to the fine arts. Additionally, Mrs. Ellington focused heavily on working together as a team and how she used dialogue to build team.

Therefore, these data would suggest that each principal has an understanding of the term, inclusive school that is consistent with those in the literature (Capper, 1993; Frattura & Capper, 2010; Moller, 2004; Ryan, 2006; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Shields, 2009). As an example, Ryan (2006) suggests that school leaders must constantly raise questions about exclusive practices. Each of the principals understood the importance of raising such questions about inclusive schools. Similarly, Moller (2009) speaks to the idea of shifting process to accountability without ignoring critical pieces of democratic schooling. Each principal in the study expressed the need to not only hold everyone in the system accountable, but also the need to address issues of social justice, equity, and access.

The Role of Dialogue

In order to answer the second research question, I will now focus on the data associated with the role of dialogue when trying to create an inclusive school. Sidorkin (1999) suggests,
“One has to make an effort to see school not as a building, but as an elaborated scaffold to be brushed away for the sake of dialogue” (p. 109). In other words, school leaders must look beyond the organizational barriers which exist to “find courage . . . for a brief moment of genuine mutual relation with a student” (p. 109). This section seeks to answer whether or not the schools studied find those moments of which Sidorkin speaks.

Teacher surveys were conducted at each school to get a sense of the notion of dialogue in their schools. Table 14 represents a portion of these data.

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Topics discussed</th>
<th>Decision making processes</th>
<th>Dialogue in school setting</th>
<th>Fairly represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kingsworth</td>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>Students—sometimes</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for students</td>
<td>Teachers—sometimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students of poverty</td>
<td>Parents—sometimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>Students—sometimes</td>
<td>Little dialogue</td>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for students</td>
<td>Teachers—frequently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity in education</td>
<td>Parents—sometimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>Students—sometimes</td>
<td>Parents have access to school</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>Teachers—frequently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for students</td>
<td>Parents—sometimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table suggests, there are commonalities about topics that are frequently discussed with principals. Parental involvement was the most discussed topic in all three schools. Similarly, opportunities for students was ranked as a topic which is discussed with the principal at each school. Conversely, students of poverty was a topic discussed at Kingsworth, while Central reported that they discussed diversity, and finally, Pride discussed community involvement. These data suggest that parental involvement is a consistent topic discussed at each school in the study and that dialogue is occurring at the schools between the principal and the
teachers about parents. Principal interviews also suggest parental involvement to be a common topic discussed.

At two of the schools, Pride and Central, teachers who responded to the survey felt that they had a part in decision-making processes. At Kingsworth, teachers who responded felt that they sometimes were a part. However, common to all three schools, teachers reported that parents and students sometimes had a role in decision-making processes. Ryan (2003) supports the notion of parent involvement and suggests that parents, especially those traditionally marginalized, are given opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes. Data from the study suggest that teachers who responded do not believe that students and parents have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes; however, all three principals indicated that they often speak to parents and want their feedback. Therefore, these data suggest that there are still opportunities to strengthen avenues for students and parents to have a voice and that dialogue may be weak in this area.

Teachers were asked to provide insight into dialogue in the school setting. At all three schools, there were limited responses given to this open-ended question. However, one school, Pride, had one teacher report that parents have access to teachers and school. The other two schools reported that they either did not know of dialogue or that there was little dialogue. This suggests that dialogue, while it might be present at some points in the school, is not consistent across all schools and that there may be further opportunities for dialogue to exist in the school.

A critical component to creating an inclusive school is to provide marginalized groups with opportunities to have a voice at the school (Ryan, 2003; Shields, 2009). One survey question asked teachers if marginalized groups were represented in the school and had a voice. Two schools, Kingsworth and Central, indicated that parents of marginalized groups often had a
voice; however, one school, Pride, reported that they frequently have a voice. These data connect with previous data through interviews and focus groups to indicate that Mrs. Ellington is proactively communicating with all parents, including her minority (Caucasian and Hispanic) parents to ensure that they have a voice.

As previously stated, some scholars view dialogue as ontological (Bakhtin, 1984; Sidorkin, 1999; Shields, 2007), while others view it as a tool (Burbules, 1993). Through the interviews, it appears that two of the principals in the study view it as ontological, or as a way of life, while the other viewed it as a tool. Additionally, I believe that dialogue cannot occur in a school system without some type of conflict. To support that point, Glass (2003) argues that conflict should be expected. As evidenced by interviews, principals attempt to have the difficult conversations with their staff members, which have created conflict for some of the principals in the study, leaving them to face the challenge of getting everyone on board. Therefore, this next section will further outline challenges principals face when trying to create an inclusive school.

**Challenges**

To answer the next research question, each principal discussed several challenges associated with creating an inclusive school environment. In all three interviews, principals discussed the challenges associated with creating an inclusive school. From time constraints to communication to creating a safe environment, all three principals shared their own personal challenges when trying to create an inclusive school. Some responses were common amongst all three principals, while other responses were unique to the individual principal. Table 15 represents the principal’s greatest challenges associated with creating an inclusive school community.
Table 15

Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Greatest challenge</th>
<th>Supporting evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Creating a safe environment</td>
<td>“We have kids that if they lose $5 or think they had it stolen, that is the end of their world. It’s difficult because first and foremost you must create a peaceful atmosphere.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Getting everyone on board</td>
<td>“The biggest challenge is getting everyone on board. You have to get teachers to look beyond labels of special education or ESL.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Everyone should have a voice</td>
<td>“From students to custodians to secretaries, everyone should feel they have a voice.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table indicates, each principal shares a different idea of their greatest challenge. While Alan’s greatest concern is creating a peaceful atmosphere, Tom shares that getting everyone on board is most important, and yet Mrs. Ellington is most concerned about ensuring that everyone in the community has a voice.

Schools must create conditions where mutual voices can be heard (Ryan, 2003; Sidorkin, 1999; Shields, 2009). While all three principals express different challenges, throughout each of their interviews, they all shared commonalities in challenges as well. As an example, Elizabeth shares Tom’s importance of getting everyone on board when she states:

*We’re not here for the teachers. We’re here for the students. We support our teachers, but we’re here for the students. McDonald’s without beef isn’t McDonald’s. Schools without students aren’t schools. And that is what we need to know. We’re finding teachers, and we’re getting rid of teachers because they do not have the ability to teach our students. Don’t mess around with that. And this school wasn’t used to teachers being let go based on that. And that’s where our challenge continues.*

Similarly, Alan shares Tom and Elizabeth’s challenges as well. As an example, Alan and Tom both struggle with time constraints to get everyone on board and to give people a voice. Ryan (2010) suggests that time constraint is an impediment when trying to enhance teacher leadership to create an inclusive school. In his interview, Alan stressed the expectations that are put on leaders and teachers and stated, “By the end of the day, it is very difficult to have all of
the conversations that need to take place.” He also expressed the challenges associated with getting people “on board” and reflected by asking:

I ask myself, how do you get all of these people going in the same direction? You always have a few that will want to tug back the other way. But, I think that’s the purpose—to create an environment where the kids are learning, where they are safe, and they are making the gains necessary to be successful.

These challenges suggest that Tom and Alan struggle with time constraints, yet Mrs. Ellington believes that time is not a factor when using dialogue to reach a consensus and understanding. These data suggest that Mrs. Ellington navigates barriers like time constraints and getting people on board by her use of dialogue, and she uses dialogue to battle her biggest challenge, which is getting everyone on board.

While principals shared challenges associated with creating an inclusive school, students shared similar challenges and ideas as well. Like Alan, the students at Kingsworth expressed their greatest challenge to be school safety. One student stated, “I think it’s kind of like too much violence at this school. They be fighting and stuff.” Similarly, parent involvement was mentioned by several students to be a challenge at Kingsworth. One student responded, “There is nothing for my parents to get involved in. I’m just a regular student who does my work and gets good grades.” As for Pride and Central, students did not express challenges at the school other than wanting to improve the school lunches. These data suggest that Alan’s biggest focus is on school safety. He suggested that he faces that challenge by using dialogue, but there is little evidence to support that in interviews or student focus group data.

Overall, I learned a great deal about the nature of the challenges that principals face and the approaches they take to create an inclusive school. For example, principals face different challenges each day, but the principals in the study all have a strong belief system that dialogue should be at the heart of their practice. This notion would support scholars’ ideas of dialogue as a
way of life (Bakhtin, 1984; Shields, 2009). To that end, principals, although they take an ontological perspective about dialogue, all face challenges.

Similarly, lessons were learned relative to inclusion. Principals in the study hold strong beliefs about creating equitable and accessible programs and opportunities. As an example, Alan discussed the need to eliminate tracks; Tom expressed concern about minority students’ inclusion into gifted programming; Mrs. Ellington shared the desire to provide an environment that was academically challenging and socially supportive. Yet, without dialogue, these inclusive practices become unilateral, or one-sided. I learned that the success of the principals in this study was heavily reliant on dialogical relations.

All three principals articulated challenges when trying to create an inclusive school, but they also provided several strategies as well. The next section will provide strategies from the principals of this study.

**Strategies**

Alan, Tom, and Elizabeth shared strategies that they use when trying to create an inclusive school community. This next section will provide the data shared by the principals to answer the third and fourth research questions relative to overcoming challenges and strategies used to create inclusive schools.

**Creating Community**

As Peck (1987) states, “Community is and must be inclusive. The great enemy of community is exclusivity” (p. 61). This study has viewed community as a “community of difference” (Shields, 1999), which encompasses an “acceptance of otherness and cooperation within difference” (Furman, 2002). Throughout the interviews, principals shared how important
the notion of creating community is to the work that they do as a principal. As an example, Mrs. Ellington spoke of the “Pride Way” through her interview. She stated, “The Pride Way is through teamwork. We concentrate on a focus, whatever our focus is, we as a team focus on that. We do that through support, collaboration, and community.” Similarly, Alan shared a similar philosophy of creating community and spoke of opening up his building to the community “any chance he can get.” As an example, Alan shared a story of how over 100 students watched “The Lion King” in Spanish while their parents learned about the school district. Alan said he actively seeks to build community within the school by working directly with the community as a whole. Both of these examples support the notion of building community throughout the school. In Mrs. Ellington’s case, data suggest that she uses dialogue to build community; however, in Alan’s case, it appears to be more about creating community-based opportunities instead of using dialogue in an ontological sense to be open to difference and to learn from alternative perspectives.

Two of the three principals also shared the importance of fighting negativity in order to create community when working in a district of high poverty. Alan believes that high anxiety and negativity exists in districts of high poverty, and it is the job of the school to help alleviate anxiety and create a positive light about the school. He stated, “When you go to your church and somebody asks you how things are going, they’re normally not asking you how things are going for conversation. In this district, they’re asking you because they have somebody of interest in the building. And, if you say something positive, you’re starting to build that bridge and say, hey, come on in and you’re welcome here.” Alan’s assistant principal also commented on community at Kingsworth. He stated a concern about building community and said, “There’s too much of a division between the have’s and have nots . . . there is so much fear between people
because of differences. We try to break down some of those barriers and bring people together.”

In this instance, Alan and his assistant principal present real-life examples of equity challenges in schools of high poverty. Both Alan and his assistant understand the needs of the building and understand the larger community issues; however, the role of dialogue did not emerge as a strategy that Alan uses to build community.

Mrs. Ellington shares Alan’s commitment to building community by bringing people together. Riehl (2000) supports the notion of bringing people together and suggests that building positive relationships is important to building community. As an example, Mrs. Ellington stated that her issues are “our issues as a community.” The goal in her mind is to work together to fix them, which ultimately builds community. To support that notion, she stated, “That’s how I think we have built this inclusive team, and that’s why people buy into the Pride Way.” At Mrs. Ellington’s school, the Caucasian students are the minority students. Through her interview, she spoke about how she includes the Caucasian students and parents within the community. She shared, “My Caucasian parents fit right in. We only have 2 or 3 of them. We call them our soul sisters and brothers. They feel very much at home here. And their children do too.” Similarly, Mrs. Ellington spoke of the school as a “home.” She stated:

*This is our house. Welcome to our house. We have to treat it that way. This is where we spend the majority of our waking hours. Everything I try to tell the students as far as behavior, academics, discipline, the whole thing, it’s about home. This is our family. It’s all built around that sense of community and the sense of taking care of each other, taking care of the school with the teachers. It’s about taking care of our children and families.*

This commitment to building community appears to be based on dialogue and conversation between Mrs. Ellington, her teachers, students, and parents. Data suggest that Mrs. Ellington reaches out to the community through newsletters, calls, and attendance at community events and that she takes a postmodern approach to community. Furman (2002) suggests that a
Building community was a focus for Tom as well. At Tom’s school, he hosted a community meeting every month where everyone comes together as a school. During the meeting, a focus of a character pillar was discussed as a community. The focus was about what is seen within the school and community and the conversations focused on those topics versus discussing a canned, scripted curriculum. Tom recollected a moment in which he felt the community strengthened as a result of the community meeting:

_We created a video through our TV station. We taped different staff members talking about times when they were bullied as kids. The most powerful one was when one of my aides spoke. He is this huge black man—I mean he is like 6’4”, 300 pounds. He talked about how he was bullied and bullied to try to get into gangs. He talked about how his family had to move because the bullying was so bad that they were trying to harm his sister and his family. We showed that in our community meeting and let me tell you, everyone was mesmerized by this._

Tom shared that this strategy of opening up the lines of communication through community meetings provided a space for conversations to occur between staff and students about relevant topics occurring at the building at that time. These data suggest that dialogue between individuals and supported by Tom created a space for openness to occur, thus creating community. Overall, the three principals in the study expressed the need to build community and cited specific examples of ways they do so in their schools. Principals who viewed community in a postmodern sense (Furman, 2002) and as a “community of difference” (Shields, 2002) exhibited a greater emphasis on dialogue and were more apt to have aspects of inclusive schools.

Students also expressed the importance of a strong sense of community during their focus group interviews. As an example, students at Central and Pride spoke about how they would not want to go to a different school because of their teachers and principal; however, students at...
Kingsworth did not express similar desires to stay at their school. However, Kingsworth students expressed the connection that they have made with specific teachers and with their school principal as a result of these adults “always talking to them about their lives and future.”

In summary, community appears to be an important component for students, teachers, and the school principal. Each group shared the need for community and its importance. Scholars like Furman (2002) and Shields and Edwards (2005) argue the need for postmodern community and a shift away from ‘sameness’ in school communities. Data suggest that principals provided a postmodern perspective and allowed some opportunities for all voices to be heard, but there is still some opportunities for improvements in this area.

**Dialogue an Ontological**

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, viewing dialogue as ontological is looking at dialogue as a ‘way of life’—not just any way of life—one in which people are open to difference and strive to understand it. Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest that dialogue provides opportunities for interactions between human beings “as foundational to human life” (p. 49). Within the three schools studied, the conversations and dialogue that occurred provided a foundation for the work that the principals do within the context of creating an inclusive school environment.

As Shields (2009) suggests, viewing dialogue as ontological within a school setting is: revolutionary when one considers all the talk, lecturing, drill and rote learning that occurs in schools. Too often teachers argue that there is too much work to cover to prepare students for annual tests and that devoting time to dialogue is simply impossible. (p. 194)

When considering the data from the study, it appears that two out of the three principals, while they express that dialogue is a fundamental component to creating an inclusive environment, still find challenges associated with time constraints. Ryan (2003) suggests that time constraints are a challenge for school leaders. However, one principal, Mrs. Ellington, said
that time constraints are not a challenge and argued that no one should or can say that it takes too much time to engage in dialogue because everyone should be open to others’ perspectives every step of the way in the system. Once again, Mrs. Ellington’s comments suggest that she reaches out, is open to others, hence, an ontological disposition (Shields, 2005).

Through the data collection process, I have learned that two of the principals in the study view dialogue from an ontological perspective, and one views it as ontological, yet uses it as a tool. Shields and Edwards (2005) argue that “Dialogue is not just talk.” Yet, it appears that principals have difficulty distinguishing between dialogue and talk. Many use it as a verb, in saying, “We should dialogue.” In this manner, it would appear that principals still do not understand the importance of viewing dialogue as a way of life, or as Bakhtin (1984) asserts, “to live is to participate in dialogue” (p. 293). Thus, viewing dialogue as ontological seems to be a challenge for some school leaders.

**Dialogue as Relationships**

Speaking endlessly may barely be considered communication; it is certainly not dialogue. (Shields & Edwards, 2005, p. 51)

Throughout the study, each principal spoke about the importance of building relationships. Mrs. Ellington talked about how the building represented consistency, security and safety for staff and students. She stated, “The kids feel loved. I greet my children every morning with a hug. Sometimes I can’t get in the building because it’s hug here, group hug there, conversations.” To add to that, Alan discussed how his visibility in the building every morning was critical to building relationships. He stated, “I welcome every kid into the building, every day. I make the rounds and get into every classroom, every morning.” Alan’s assistant shared a similar philosophy and stated, “I have certain kids I want to touch base with every day. I want to see the look in their eye and on their face to know if they need a little bit more attention that day.
to help them have a great day.” In order to build relationships, principals suggest that the personal connection on a daily basis is critical. In order to do that, they believe that they need to have dialogue with students, beyond just being physically present and saying hello, to understand students’ needs. The need for the principals to gain a deeper understanding about students’ needs is what is considered dialogue. Merely talking to students is not necessarily dialogue.

Dialogic relations are complex. Rather than just talking to another, dialogic relations require us develop to meaning and understanding (Shields and Edwards, 2005). Alan stressed the importance of the teacher and relationships as being a critical component to creating an inclusive school. He stated, “For a student to learn, we might take for granted as teachers that we say, ‘well, that kid can come talk to me at any time.’ Well, that is not true. They’re [Students] intimidated.” Thus, Alan suggested that teachers must make space and opportunity for students. In order to do so, he said that he has conversations with his teachers about speaking to students. However, students at Kingsworth have yet to have a feeling that the school community as a whole truly cares about their feelings, opinions, and needs. It would appear that little relational dialogue is evident at this point, yet Alan has “hope” that it will happen.

Students share the same sentiments when talking about relationship building within their schools. As an example, students at Pride said, “Our school is determined to make us grow to what we want to be.” Students at Pride also expressed that they go to their teacher or to the principal whenever they have an issue at school. At Central, students said that they believe they are successful at school because of their teachers and principal. They stated, “I think my teachers make me successful by pushing me to the limit. My teachers help me to try my hardest.” To that end, students at Kingsworth spoke about a counselor and about the principal. They said the principal “is always talking to them about school and college” and the counselor “gives
wisdom.” In these examples, it is evident that the notion of building relationships becomes a critical element when trying to create an inclusive environment. These examples illustrate how the principals use dialogue, but these examples seem to be more unilateral instead of seeking a shared understanding as many of the examples seem to be related to the adult talking and the student listening.

Dialogue is complex and intricate, and for schools to be inclusive communities of difference, dialogic relationships are critical. Burbules (1993) argues that dialogue is a “social relation” (p. 19). As evidenced by the principals in the study, relationships are at the heart of the work that principals do. With that said, for dialogic relations to occur, dialogue must transcend words alone. Thus, school leadership efforts must recognize the importance of relationships.

**Dialogue as Understanding**

Shields and Edwards (2005) state, “Educational leaders do not accomplish their ends with hammers or tractors or mutual funds, but with and through people” (p. 83). They speak of the “promise of dialogical understanding.” In this study, Alan’s assistant principal stated, “We have to quit trying to bring the children to what we believe is right and find a way to take what we believe and what they believe and find a common ground and understanding.” Thus, Alan’s assistant principal understands the need for understanding, but struggles to find ways of how he and the school can understand the needs of the students and parents.

In Alan’s school, students express that teachers “don’t listen to them.” They give specific examples of how teachers talk on their cell phones, yet students are not able to do so. They speak of how “teachers should have to follow the rules as they do.” They also share that “teachers don’t understand.” Thus, there is not evidence to support that dialogue is creating an opportunity of shared understanding at Kingsworth.
Shields and Edwards (2005) speak to the notion of synergy and state:

Educational leaders who participate in dialogical understanding and facilitate its dynamics throughout an educational community will serve parents, students, and teachers in new ways. They will achieve educational aspirations through the synergy of many people’s different knowledge, modes of reasoning, talents, and commitment. (p. 88)

Thus, it does not appear at this point that the community is yet to be served in new ways. The “synergy” that the authors discuss has yet to emerge at Kingsworth.

Through the data, it would appear that out of all three principals, Mrs. Ellington is developing new knowledge and understanding through dialogue. As an example, Mrs. Ellington seeks new knowledge about her staff, parents, and community through dialogue. Mrs. Ellington shared that “not everyone agrees with” her, and she likes that because she can hear others’ perspectives and insights so she learns as well. Similarly, Mrs. Ellington talked about how she opens herself to others in the community by sharing information about herself and always “being honest.” She stated, “I am open with them [community]. They know me and I want them to know me so I can understand them better.” As Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest, “Understanding of the educational leader by others is vital for successful leadership to occur” (p. 85). Therefore, Mrs. Ellington’s interactions would support the notion that dialogue is understanding.

The process of understanding is important for school leaders and Gadamer (2004) argues that understanding is essential to human existence. Gadamer’s notion of the hermeneutic circle asks us to read the parts to understand the whole. In the case of these principals, two of the three principals exhibit understanding of the parts to understand the whole. The idea of the hermeneutic circle is important because principals are expected to remain open and consider the meanings between people to gain understanding. Thus, for the principals in this study,
understanding is a critical component to examine the relationship between dialogue and inclusivity.

**Emergent Themes**

The past sections have directly aligned to the theoretical framework of the study. However, as reported in Chapter 3, I will now present emerging themes that occurred during the data collection procedures. Emerging themes include: trust, parental involvement, and visibility by the principal.

Themes were initially identified by using the theoretical framework in Chapter 2; however, through the data collection process, several other themes emerged. Through coding transcripts, several themes were repeated through the data collection process. As the themes began to emerge, I created a new section of emergent themes and added to the themes as more evidence and data emerged through the coding process. It is important to note that this section directly relates to the research questions and literature review portion of the study. Themes that emerged have a direct relationship to the overall research question about the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools.

**Trust**

Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest, “there must be a degree of trust in order for dialogue to occur” (p. 61). Out of all three principal interviews, only one principal spoke about trust, and that was Mrs. Ellington. Neither Tom nor Alan spoke about the importance of trust in the context that Mrs. Ellington did. Table 16 shows teachers’ perceptions about trust.
Table 16

*Teacher Perceptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Level of trust</th>
<th>Leadership style of principal</th>
<th>Attends team/grade level meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kingsworth</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Managerial/Technical</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Humanistic/Transformational</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table indicates, Mrs. Ellington is the only principal in the study whose teachers who responded on the survey indicated that they shared a high level of trust with her. And, it is important to note that the majority of teachers (11 out of 18) responded to the survey, whereas a lower percentage of teachers took the survey at the other buildings. Similarly, it is important to note that Mrs. Ellington was reported to regularly attend the teacher meetings, which would suggest that her presence at meetings had a positive impact on trust by the staff. In the other buildings, the principals were not noted to be as consistent with their attendance at the team or grade level meetings.

Trust is an important component to consider when examining dialogue and inclusive schools. Shields (2009) shares the importance of trust and asserts that “Educators must embed these virtues [trust, tolerance, mutual respect] in every leadership act, in every pedagogical decision, and in every curricular conversation in order to prepare our young people for life in a democratic society” (p. 114). With that, Mrs. Ellington’s interviews included the subject of trust appears several times. When speaking about her teachers, she stated, “At this point, teachers go with whatever it is that I bring up for discussion. And then they shoot me down. And then we discuss and discuss some more. I learn about their ideas and they learn about mine.” Burbules (1993) notes the importance of trust in dialogical relations and suggests that an aspect of developing trust involves disclosing personal information about ourselves. Thus, one would
“demonstrate trust before [asking] others to trust us” (p. 37). In Mrs. Ellington’s case, she not only opened up the conversation about herself and her feelings with the staff, she also demonstrated trust. When asked how she arrived to the point of trust, she spoke of what the building leadership was like before she arrived:

_I think what was missing here in this office before, they [teachers] had mentioned to me, that they did not feel they had any say into growing, you know, wanting to grow, wanting to do different things, bringing in new ideas, and having someone sitting in this office that was receptive to saying, go for it. So, I do that a lot. Teachers come in with ideas, and I’ll say, ‘Make it happen. What do you need from me to help you to make that happen?’ So, I think that has built that we have here._

Thus, Mrs. Ellington appears to have built the trust through dialogue in an ontological sense. She believes that trust is foundational, yet it cannot be created without dialogue that is difficult, honest, and challenging. Thus, the notion of trust sheds light onto the sub-questions of the study. First, trust appears to be an important component for principals when considering what an inclusive community means. To that end, there must be a degree of trust for dialogue to occur (Burbules, 1993; Shields & Edwards, 2005). Second, dialogue is critical to create a trusting environment where people feel open to express their own ideas and perspectives. As Burbules (1993) suggests:

_A degree of effort usually needs to be made early on, particularly when we are engaged with someone new, to create a context of feeling and commitment in which both participants feel safe to offer up their beliefs, and the experiences or feelings that accompany them, even then they know that they might be disagreed with._ (p. 37)

In Mrs. Ellington’s case, she has created the space and context where teachers feel safe to share their feelings with her. Finally, challenges are evident when trying to create a trusting environment and there is a degree of risk involved with dialogue and trust. Burbules (1993) cautions us to develop the dialogical relation over time and shares what he considers to be the fundamental risk in dialogue when he asserts:
The fundamental risk in dialogue, especially perhaps in educational contexts, is the risk of extending ourselves outward conversationally, endeavoring to express as well as we can a point of view, belief, or feeling, or experience in the expectation that our partner will respond thoughtfully, and sympathetically, but not knowing if they will. (p. 38)

Mrs. Ellington showed that she is willing to take such risks to create meaningful dialogue with her staff, students, and teachers. Shields (2009) explains that there will always be conflicts and controversies, and educational leaders must learn to engage in these difficult conversations. As a result, Mrs. Ellington has taken the risks and, as a result, teachers indicated that she has built a high level of trust over time. Thus, principals who wish to create an inclusive school must create trust within and among the community.

**Parental Involvement**

An emerging theme that relates to the concept of inclusion, in that education is a partnership between home and school, throughout interviews and data collection was parental involvement. Shields (2009) speaks to parental involvement and effective participation and states, “Many students and their families have fewer and less meaningful opportunities for input than others. . . . For education to be truly democratic, barriers to participation must be understood and overcome” (p. 54). Through interviews, surveys, and focus group data, parental involvement was mentioned. Principals did not view parents as barriers or challenges; instead, they each spoke about the importance of parents and shared concerns about parents having access to the school and programs. As an example, Mrs. Ellington spoke about how she sends out information to her non-English speaking families translated in their home language to build a relationship between school and home. Similarly, her school has interpreters on hand for parents whenever needed so parents have access to opportunities to hear about their children’s education. She also spoke to the importance of actually “recruiting” parents of minority families, in her case
Caucasian and Hispanic families. She recommended proactive, intentional communication to parents. She shared, “I get on the phone. My parents know me personally.”

Alan’s assistant principal chimed in on his view of parental involvement at Kingsworth. He stated, “It’s difficult for us to find ways to involve parents. And everyone told me when I took this job, ‘Oh, you’re not going to get parental support. These parents don’t care.’ And that’s not true. They [Parents] just don’t know what to do. And sometimes we don’t know what to do either.” Alan’s assistant’s comment suggests that leadership at Kingsworth struggles with ways in which to engage parents. Similarly, several teacher comments suggested that parents “don’t care,” as Alan’s assistant eludes to in his interview. As one teacher at Kingsworth stated, “We want [parents] to be heard. The problem is they do not speak.” This comment suggests a deficit thinking approach which blames the parent instead of taking responsibility for creating spaces for dialogue to occur as Mrs. Ellington does. Another teacher suggested, “No matter what we do to involve parents and members of the community, it seems THEY do not wish to participate or be involved in what we have to offer.” Again, this deficit thinking approach by the Kingsworth teacher suggests that the staff blames the parents instead of engaging in effective dialogue to gain a better understanding of why the parents are not participating in events at the school.

To that end, Mrs. Ellington infused the notion of parental involvement and community when speaking about her school and its needs. As an example, she stated:

*This school belongs to the community. I want them to own the school. I want them to buy into the fact that the school is here, it’s servicing the children of the community and if they want it to look and be a good place to be, then it’s up to them to help me. I can’t do it by myself. And they have to help me help them. I always tell them, and I tell my kids, I can’t want something more for your children than you want from yourself.*

This comment suggests that Mrs. Ellington sees parents as an asset and reaches out to them through dialogic practices to help them understand that they are needed in the school community.
and through that dialogue she indicated that she is better able to understand what the community needs from the school as well.

Therefore, this theme teaches us that parental involvement is a critical component to inclusion and provides insight into the research question which asks principals’ conception of an inclusive community. As evidenced by the interview data, principals, students, and teachers all report that parents are an important part of the process; however, the data suggest that teachers have a tendency to blame parents for their lack of involvement. Principals in the study appear to understand the importance of not blaming parents, but Mrs. Ellington’s strategies to engage parents through dialogue seems to be the difference between wanting parent engagement and actually acquiring it.

Dialogue also plays a significant role for parent involvement. One of the research questions asks, “What is the role of dialogue in creating an inclusive community?” Principals all suggest that dialogue is critical with parents to better understand and engage them in the learning processes and decision-making processes at their schools. Finally, all principals, and teachers, express that parent involvement is a challenge, which addresses the final sub-question of the study. While parent involvement was stated to be a challenge, it is also a necessary component to inclusion.

Visibility

Every principal spoke to the importance of being visible in the school. Specifically, each principal talked about greeting students at they entered the building so that they could see the students’ faces. However, they also talked about visibility in a dialogic sense as they all three commented that they wanted to see and speak to students to get a better understanding of the
student and how he or she was coming to school. They all expressed belief that if they spoke to the student that the student would have a better day.

For Alan, visibility is important to him. He stated:

*It’s about being out and visible. In fact, I find the worst days I have are ones in which I’m in here working on a report with somebody from central office or one of those days where you know I don’t get to see the kids. I mean, when it comes to thinking about moving into a central office position, it kills me to say, you know, you won’t be with the kids. You won’t be able to work with the kids. And yeah, you will do some of that from a distance, but you don’t get to see their face. And that’s what really drives me. It’s just that interaction with the kids.*

Mrs. Ellington shares the same sentiment, yet she takes a different approach. She stated, “We greet each other as a school.” She spoke of the importance of “coming together” and “reflecting” and that she can only do that if she is out and in classrooms with her students.

Thus, the notion of visibility becomes an important part of inclusive schools and principals express visibility as part of their conception of what an inclusive school is. Without visibility, principals cannot make the connections and create spaces for dialogue to occur.

Furthermore, the role of dialogue is important for visibility. As evidenced by the examples given in the data collection process, all principals expressed the need to have conversations with their students and see their faces to know their needs. Similarly, visibility becomes a challenge, addressing the final research question. Visibility is a challenge because principals shared their busy schedules and routines, yet, all agreed that visibility is important to fuse the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools.

As the literature review previously suggested, dialogue is lacking in today’s schools (Shields & Edwards, 2005). This chapter examined the use of dialogue by three principals and provided a cross-case analysis of the emergent themes including, trust, parental involvement, and visibility. In conjunction with the other themes related to the literature review, these themes emerged as important topics when examining the relationships between dialogue and inclusive
schools. The next chapter will provide recommendations for school leaders and will suggest further research.
Chapter 6

Looking Forward

In previous chapters, I have presented the background and rationale for this study, a literature review about inclusive schools and dialogue, the guiding questions and conceptual framework, and the findings based on interviews, teacher surveys, student focus groups, and observations. Here, I recap the study and then revisit my overarching research question in the light of the findings as well as the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2. I conclude by identifying some lessons learned from this study and making some related recommendations to educators and policy makers.

Overview of the Study

I set out to understand whether there is a relationship between dialogue and inclusive school communities. Through a series of interviews with principals, I examined the relationships between dialogue and inclusive schools.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study and defined some of the most commonly used terms, among them inclusive leadership, inclusive school, community, and dialogue. I also provided literature to demonstrate how federal mandates, like NCLB, are implemented to exclude and marginalize students from minority and poverty backgrounds. Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature related to inclusive schools and dialogue. There I also reviewed some of the literature on postmodern education and dialogic relations. Here I argued that federal mandates, which are designed to have high expectations and achievement for all students, especially those traditionally marginalized, actually exclude and limit students’ opportunities for access to curriculum. Furthermore, I suggested that because of such mandates, teachers are deskillled and
lose autonomy in their classrooms, and principals create school structures which limit participation and decision-making opportunities for students and parents. Furthermore, I suggested that, as a result of such practices, dialogue is lacking in our schools and classrooms, and included a theoretical framework to examine dialogue in the context of a school setting.

For the focus of this study, I decided to look at school leaders who were recognized by university supervisors and/or superintendents of schools as being leaders of an inclusive school. The approach I took is explained in Chapter 3, where I identified my personal position, outlined my data collection procedures, described my analytical processes, and reported how I chose to present the data in Chapters 4 and 5. My participants came from K-8 settings and were all recommended by a university professor or superintendent.

Through a series of interviews, I examined why and how educational leaders, specifically principals, strive to create an inclusive environment through dialogue. Chapter 4 presented the stories of 3 principals, and Chapter 5 revisited my central research question and sub-questions and discussed my findings. There, I demonstrated that the principals who were studied understand the concept of dialogue to create an inclusive school, yet the two most successful principals took more of an ontological approach, viewing dialogue as a way of life, while the principal who viewed dialogue as a tool had not progressed as far in terms of creating an inclusive community. Not only did I examine the theoretical framework, but I also presented some emergent themes from the data collection.

On the basis of insights that I gained through the study and data collection processes, I now discuss some of the major lessons learned from this study and make some related recommendations both for further practice and subsequent research.
Reflections on Study

In this section, using the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, I draw together my findings from my four research questions to consider some of the major lessons that may be drawn from this study. Here I revisit the framework to determine what has been learned about inclusive schools and dialogue in schools, and about the interrelationships among these parts of my framework. In this section I also make some recommendations that emerge from lessons learned.

Lessons Learned about Inclusive Leadership and Inclusive Schools

This was not specifically a study of inclusive schools, but rather a study of dialogue used by principals in schools identified to be inclusive. Thus, schools reported to be inclusive were identified and principals were studied to examine if a relationship exists between dialogue and inclusive schools. Although these cases were reputed to be exemplars, there is a still a range. All of the cases in the study faced barriers and obstacles. And, each of the schools had a high percentage of minority students and/or high percentages of students from poverty. For example, Kingsworth is a school that struggled with safety issues, and staff and students reported that felt disconnected with the school. The principal, Alan, used a managerial/technical approach, with little focus on meaningful dialogue, although there is evidence that dialogue could occur because staff and students expressed that they want to have a voice and the principal spoke about giving more opportunities for students and staff to have a voice. The second school in the study, Central, had several elements of dialogue and inclusivity, but the principal still struggled to get people on board. Finally, Pride was a school where there appeared to be a strong relationship between dialogue and inclusivity. Mrs. Ellington believed dialogue is the key to success, and, as a result, dialogue is at the heart of the school. Additionally, Pride had the highest number of
minority students and the highest number of students from poverty, yet, it appears that because of dialogue from the principal, the school has many inclusive elements. Also, the school has a high number of students exceeding and meeting on standardized test scores, so it appears the school is defying all odds.

I started with the literature on inclusive leadership to determine what I might anticipate from school principals in terms of their practices. However, as I reviewed the literature, it appeared that several categories emerged including: community, relationships, and parental involvement. Principals expressed the need for all three of these components to be a critical piece of their work, but most importantly, they stressed the need for, and value of, dialogue.

**Community.** One lesson learned from this study is that school principals, teachers, and students express the need for community in their schools. Yet, in these three cases, it appears that building community can be difficult for school leaders. According to Furman (2002), “A challenge in implementing postmodern community in schools is to ensure that school structures and processes promote a sense of community—feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety for community members” (p. 68). Furman’s idea becomes relevant when thinking about the issues of school safety for Kingsworth students. Students and the principal both expressed concern about school safety and violence. Thus, Kingsworth’s safety concerns appear to stem from of a lack of community and inclusiveness. Safety concerns are related to community building because one cannot build a strong community when students fear their safety in the hallways and in the community. To that end, school leaders must acknowledge these issues and address such concerns to bring the school community together and put these issues at the forefront of the dialogue. Students, like those at Kingsworth, who are accustomed to use violence to express themselves, must be provided with other avenues, like dialogue, to address this barrier.
and build trust. On the other hand, at Central and Pride, students and principals shared their feelings of belonging, and Pride staff and principal spoke often about trust. Thus, in these cases, community building efforts are related to aspects of dialogue and inclusive schools.

For most individuals in this study, community was viewed as parental involvement; however, this study sought to determine whether or not community was viewed as a “community of difference” (Shields, 1999) and an “acceptance of otherness” (Furman, 2002). A few insights came from the study. One, there is not a common understanding of the notion of community. For one person, it appeared that inviting parents to Open House and parent/teacher conference evenings constituted community involvement. There seems to be a lack of understanding that community is more than inviting parents to school events or inviting community members to the school for events. While those items are important to school, it does not seek to build community in the way that the study is designed to do so.

Thus, it appears that another lesson learned is that schools in this study struggle to build community from a postmodern perspective. A postmodern approach provides multifaceted and diverse perspectives (Furman, 2002) where “one best way” is not appropriate. These data would support Peck’s (1993) argument that there are very few “true communities” (p. 276). Respondents in this study all claimed to take a postmodern view of community, and while there were some examples of community at Central and Pride, Pride appeared to build community through, what Bellah et.al (2008) considered a celebration “of the different callings of all” (p. 72). It would appear that these leaders would need to consider ways in which they build community versus merely opening their doors to or involving community members. As a result, the principals must take an active role to build community. Therefore, the notion of community is closely connected to the concepts of dialogue and inclusivity. In schools where community
was built through dialogue, these schools were more likely to possess the qualities of inclusive
schools.

**Relationships.** It is evident from the study that relationships are a critical piece to any
school, let alone a school considered inclusive. As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to
examine how principals use dialogue to create an inclusive school and whether there is a clear
association between dialogue and inclusive schools. Thus, it would appear that relationships are
a key piece to dialogue and dialogue to strong relationships. For the purposes of this study, I
wanted to examine the social relation (Burbules, 1993) between participants. I learned that
relationships are indeed needed in order to have meaningful dialogue, but I also learned that it
takes a great deal of trust and leadership for the relationships to occur.

Relationships grow, change, and learn through dialogue. I have found that much apparent
dialogue in these schools appears to be unilateral with the school principal creating and sharing
his or her thoughts; in other words, people often think about talk and dialogue as synonymous.
To be meaningful dialogue, the principal would also need to listen and learn and hence to report
how his or her understanding had also changed or deepened. However, when there are instances
of the exchange, growth, and a deeper understanding occurs, then the dialogic relationship
occurs. I have found that administrators in these cases face time constraints (Ryan, 2006) and
feel pressure to get a million other things done which appear to greatly impact the opportunity
for dialogic relations to occur in that they do not seem to see dialogue as a way of getting things
done, but rather as an add-on.

**Parental involvement.** This study examined the relationship between dialogue and
inclusive schools. As data suggest, parents are a critical component to dialogic relations and
inclusive schools. Through the study, we can see that educators want parents to be involved, but
they are not quite sure how to involve them in a meaningful way. Yet, Ryan (2006) reminds us that parents may have difficulty becoming involved in school activities because they do not possess the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) of the White, middle class parent. As evidenced in the three schools in the study, most parents are minority parents, and research suggests that some minority parents lack the background knowledge and linguistic skills necessary to understand what educators are talking about during meetings and conferences. Hence, some parents avoid the school altogether, which ultimately negatively impacts the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools. This begs the need for dialogue as understanding – and the need to create community in schools.

Both teachers and school leaders discussed the importance of parental involvement in their schools. Most of the examples throughout the study involved inviting parents to Open Houses or conference opportunities. This leads to a superficial, or surface, attempt to engage parents into the school community as some parents, especially those traditionally marginalized, do not feel comfortable in schools because of their own personal experiences. As a result, some educators often see parents’ lack of attendance at these events as evidence that parents do not care about school or their children’s education. As evidenced in the cases of the study, teachers expressed frustration and blamed parents for their lack of participation, which perpetuates a deficit thinking model in schools. It is important to remember that most parents want to be involved, but do not know how to navigate the system. Ryan (2006) reminds us that parents, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, do not have the cultural capital to gain access into the school system, and, if they do gain access, once there, parents feel overwhelmed and intimidated. Again, this speaks to a lack of dialogic understanding between parents and teachers. Involvement of parents within a truly inclusive community is one of mutual
respect where parents’ voices are heard. And, while it appears that some of the schools have structures in place for involvement, like Pride’s and Central’s leadership teams and community events, others need additional support, like Kingsworth’s students expressing the desire to have assemblies about learning and education. Shields (2009) reminds us that equitable parent involvement is important when trying to create an inclusive environment and issues of race and class must be taken in account. Therefore, school leaders must challenge such school structures and provide opportunities for parents, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized, to have a voice in school decision-making processes.

The information obtained through the data collection process, showed us that a range of parental involvement exists in all three schools. As an example, Pride had parental involvement through their field trips, parent activities, translation services, and by the principal actively reaching out to every parent. At Central, parent involvement included child care and transportation services, parents from other countries were provided with materials in their home language., and parents served on the school’s leadership team And at Kingsworth, parental involvement continued to be a struggle, with teachers blaming the parents for their lack of involvement.

Thus, these data has taught me that in order for schools to have parental involvement, the school leaders must take initiative to provide structures for these opportunities to occur. Thus, leaders must open opportunities for meaningful dialogue to occur and eliminate power imbalances. Some principals shared about how they provide transportation, translation services, food, and childcare so parents can attend events. These are all important aspects to include in order to gain parental involvement, but as Ryan (2006) and Shields (2009) suggest, schools must take a proactive approach to engage parents as many parents do not attend events because they
do not know how to navigate the system. Therefore, it is the school’s responsibility, and I would argue, the school leader’s responsibility, to create a system that can be embraced by all parents through the creation of meaningful opportunities, to get to know and understand one another.

Finally, parental involvement is important to consider when educators strive to create an inclusive environment. As evidenced through the principal interviews for this study, parents are seen as a critical piece to the educational process and many parents do not feel a connection or engagement to the school. As previously stated, a lack of engagement might be from parents’ own personal experiences as a student, they might not speak English, or they do not know how to become involved in the school setting. In these three cases, principals should play a critical role in creating spaces for dialogue to occur with parents through meaningful measures, such as community meetings at Central and leadership teams at Pride, rather than superficial means of involving parents like inviting them to conferences and Open Houses and making copies for staff. Parents must have a key role in decision-making processes and curriculum and principals must create the spaces and opportunities for all parents to participate.

**Summary of lessons learned.** Perhaps one of the biggest lessons learned from this study is that the term, inclusive school, is better known that I had anticipated. Teachers and principals both articulated the need for inclusive environments focused educating all students. Neither teachers nor principals focused on only students with disabilities when speaking about inclusive schools. To that end, principals were able to articulate the importance of looking at the individual child and providing supports both academically and socially.

The notion of inclusive leadership was not a very familiar term to the respondents in this study. Teachers were asked to provide insight into the leadership style of their principal. While the term, inclusive leader, was not asked, I did ask teachers to view their principal from a
managerial/technical, humanistic, transformational, or transformative perspective. All three principals were noted to have a range of leadership styles, from managerial to transformational. This might suggest that principals cannot be placed into one category due to the complexity of the principalship. Principals wear many different hats in their positions, and the principals in this study encompass a wide-range of strengths and capabilities, yet dialogue is not as well understood.

Interestingly, none of the principals were considered to be mostly transformative; however, based on my observations and overall data collection, I would argue that Mrs. Ellington is a transformative leader. To me, a transformative leader is one who works together with teachers, students, and the community to best serve the needs of the students and families within the school. Transformative leaders create spaces for opportunities to occur for all students, and they fight notions of deficit thinking and inequities within their schools. Transformative leaders have a moral responsibility, a moral calling, to do what is right for all students and they take a stand for justice. Shields (2009) supports this notion and speaks to courageous transformative leaders and states:

We have to understand our priorities, act morally and decisively, and stand up against injustice whenever it occurs. Unless we can clearly articulate what grounds us—indeed what permits us to sleep at night—we will not be able to find courage to act consistently in transforming and empowering ways. (p. 188)

Thus, Shields suggests that transformative leaders must transform themselves and be fully aware of their own identity. Mrs. Ellington exhibited a transformative leadership perspective because she expressed the need for everyone in the community to know and understand one another. She discussed specific ways of engaging her students and parents and building a community together “to do what is right for our children.”
To that end, I also believe that Mrs. Ellington is a transformative leader because she believes in dialogue as a foundation for the work she does on a daily basis. She often spoke of “empowering the children,” “treating them fairly,” and the need to speak to her staff about their lives and families so that teachers understood what the children at the school needed academically and socially. As an example, Mrs. Ellington shared a time when a staff member berated a student in front of the class and how she addressed the situation by speaking with the teacher to come to a deeper understanding about the problem. Mrs. Ellington used the occasion to discuss equitable treatment of all students with the teacher and had the teacher and student sit down with her to discuss it. At first, the teacher wanted the student suspended, but after the conversation, the teacher apologized to the student for her behavior and realized that she had placed blame on the student for her own stressful day. Shields (2009) supports the idea of the power of one’s words and asserts, “School leaders must take seriously the possible lasting impact of educators who act on a daily basis to empower all children instead of excluding and dismissing them, through either a careless or a deliberate word or deed” (p. 190). I believe that transformative leadership, although it was not a central focus of this study, has a direct relationship to dialogue and inclusive schools. Thus, it is for these reasons that I believe that Mrs. Ellington is a transformative leader.

Finally, the notion of relationships was a central component to this study. I learned that relationships are a critical factor, especially when a principal is striving to create an inclusive school. School leaders must create a sense of trust for dialogue to occur and for relationships to be built. Every principal focused on the importance of relationships; however, one principal spoke often about the trust factor and its importance. I would argue that based on the results of the study that trust is a critical component to meaningful dialogue and building relationships. All
of these concepts are interrelated. Frattura and Capper (2007) support this notion and state, “We find that adults are no different than children in this way—when they feel respected, encouraged, trusted, and supported, they function at their best. . . . When adults feel good about themselves and they feel positive about the situation they are working in, they pass that positive energy onto children” (p. 87). Thus, I would argue that school leaders must create an atmosphere of trust in order for dialogue and inclusivity to occur.

**Lessons Learned about Dialogue in Schools**

The central focus of this study was to understand the role of dialogue and its relationship to an inclusive school. This study examined three schools that were identified by an expert panel, as having an inclusive leader; however, based on the data, the cases appeared to range from a case that was working well (Pride), a case in transition (Central), and a principal who was attempting to create an inclusive school (Kingsworth).

**Lack of dialogue.** Through this study, I learned that there is a lack of dialogue in our schools today. Educators might pay ‘lip service’ to the notion of the importance of dialogue, but meaningful dialogue is lacking in our schools and classrooms. It appears that part of this comes as a result of educators feeling pressure from federal mandates, like NCLB, which have left them struggling to find ways to keep fine arts and social science classes instead of replacing them with more drill and kill rote skills (Ravitch, 2010). Thus, principals feel the pressure and so do teachers. As a result, curriculum is limited, and in some schools, lower-level classes are designed to “help” struggling students, opportunities to fine arts programs are eliminated, and field trips are cancelled.

Because of a lack of dialogue, not all voices in the school are heard. Yet, scholars argue that it is critical for school leaders to create equitable opportunities for parents, students, and
community members to have a voice (Ryan, 2006, Shields, 2009). Consequently, when these opportunities do not exist, those who are traditionally marginalized, students of poverty and minority backgrounds, are silenced and left without a voice. Through this study, I learned that if students feel that they have a voice into their school and feel that they are heard, they have a deep sense of pride and respect for the community. On the other hand, in schools that are struggling to create a safe environment and where the principal is struggling to get others on board, the challenge to infuse dialogue as a way of life becomes a significant barrier to creating an inclusive school.

Thus, a lesson learned from this study is that principals must create space for dialogue to occur. Dialogue must be meaningful and bring people to a deeper understanding and meaning. Dialogue cannot be “just talk” and cannot be unilateral, or one-sided (Shields & Edwards, 2005). Rather, it must encompass all viewpoints, all perspectives, and allow for those students and parents who are traditionally marginalized to have an opportunity to have a voice. However, little evidence exists that parents have an integral role in dialogue and school processes. In a study by Croninger and Finkelstein (2002), parents were “welcome to volunteer, donate materials, or provide moral support for school practices or programs; they were not welcome, or least not as welcome, to participate in school governance” (p. 269). Thus, the researchers concluded that traditional structures for engaging parents may be “too weak . . . to foster meaningful forms of community engagement” (p. 273). As a result, meaningful dialogue about school programs and curricula does not occur.

It is important to note that in my study, the schools studied were chosen by an expert panel, so one might make the argument that these schools would be schools where one would expect to see dialogue. However, substantial dialogue was evidenced in only two of the three
schools, yet there are still opportunities for these principals to infuse more opportunities for dialogue to occur. As an example, school governance and decision-making processes are examples where student and parent input was lacking.

It is also important to note that dialogue has its critics, and some argue that dialogue presents various conditions and constraints as well. As an example, Ellsworth (1989) argues that dialogue can be dangerous for those wanting to engage in it, and certain conditions of dialogue can present constraints to individuals trying to engage in dialogue. As an example, Ellsworth cautions that those in power, particularly teachers, have more status than students and can control conversations because of the way that classrooms are socially arranged. She states:

Dialogue is in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large because at this historical moment, power relations between race, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust. The injustice of these relations and the way in which those injustices distort communication cannot be overcome in a classroom, no matter how committed the teacher and students are to ‘overcoming conditions that perpetuate suffering. (p. 316)

Here, Ellsworth shares how dialogue can be problematic in the context of the classroom setting.

Thus, tensions are always present with dialogue, and in some cases, dialogue can open discussions and create understanding, while also creating uncomfortable moments and difficult discussions. Thus, while dialogue solves problems, it also creates them, leaving some to wonder why dialogue does not happen more often.

Relative to the central research question, the study has suggested that there is a relationship between dialogue and inclusivity. For schools which create space for meaningful dialogue to occur, the trust factor was higher amongst faculty and the principal, teachers expressed that they discussed topics of inclusiveness on a frequent or often basis, and students reported that they felt a sense of belonging at their schools.

**Power structures and fighting deficit thinking.** Schools focused on principles of social justice fight power imbalances inequities. Shields (2009) reminds us:
In almost every institution, organization, or social group, there are those who are in dominant or privileged positions who have the ability to exercise power and those with less power or privilege who tend to be on its margins; often the deciding factor is an identity category such as skin color or home language. (p. 24)

In this way, Shields calls to school leaders to be cognizant of power structures and their impact on minoritized groups. Through this study, I have learned that power structures must be analyzed and examined in all schools in order to avoid such inequities.

As previously stated as part of the problem, power structures can impact notions of dialogue and inclusive schools. Delpit’s (1988) “culture of power” and rules of power are important to note in this section. Delpit asserts:

Success in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power. Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power. The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accouterments of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power. (p. 283)

Thus, Delpit suggests that the culture of power plays an integral role. This quote is important to note at this stage of the study because students at Pride, although not from middle or upper-class homes, seem to have learned Delpit’s rules of power. Although students at Pride come to school with very little of the kind of “cultural capital” typically valued by schools (Bourdieu, 1997), students demonstrate a great sense of pride and power in the organization. Similarly, students at Central expressed their sense of empowerment because of teachers and principals creating a culture of support.

Power can often be inadvertently through the school leadership team. As an example, the principal, or one “in charge,” often handpicks the members of the school leadership team, including teachers and parents. Similarly, agendas are often created by the administration or teachers, which unintentionally pushes the agenda forward of those in charge. Therefore,
administrators are ultimately in control of the dialogue and the outcome of the meeting. Little or no understanding of multiple perspectives, especially perspectives of marginalized parents or students, is heard. As a result, I have learned from this study that schools must re-examine ways in which power structures limit access and opportunities.

**Lessons learned about dialogue.** Literature surrounding inclusive schools is limited and tends to focus on special education (Ryan, 2006). Similarly, while research is evident about school leadership, little research has focused on the role of dialogue and inclusivity (Shields & Edwards, 2005). This study has sought to examine the relationships between dialogue and inclusive schools. It is important to learn more about dialogue in schools. As Oakes and Rogers (2006) suggest, “the biggest challenge, and arguably the most important, lies in bringing people together across race and . . . class . . . to create inclusive movements. Critical public dialogue is not likely to happen without significant trauma and confrontation” (p. 178). Once again, we see the intricate relationship between dialogue and inclusion. And, as the authors suggest, while dialogue is critical, it is contentious. Thus, school leaders in the study faced challenges such as gaining trust of staff, fighting deficit thinking approaches by teachers, and building community through giving staff and students a voice into decision-making processes.

This study has sought to understand the relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools. Specifically, it has examined the principal’s use of dialogue and its impact on the school. Through this study, I have found that one principal, even one that has been recommended as being an “inclusive leader,” did not view dialogue as a way of life in his school. As disheartening as it is to observe that some schools do not have meaningful dialogue at the heart of their system, there is still hope for our schools. Without constant, continuous dialogue about this issue, schools will continue to perpetuate their current inequities through exclusive practices.
that marginalize students As school leaders, we must face this challenge in order to create inclusive school communities.

Reflections on the Research Process

Conducting this research project was challenging, engaging, and stimulating. Through the process, I learned that conducting a study was an intricately complex process, and one that was extremely rewarding. This next section will discuss what I learned about doing research, what I would do differently if I had the benefits of these insights, and will provide advice to others who are going to conduct case studies.

At the start of this process, I had no idea how complicated and challenging conducting research would be to complete. I have learned that a research study needs a clear focus, beginning with a clear purpose statement and research questions. It is critical to keep the focus of the study aligned to the research questions including the literature, methodology, findings, and recommendations. To that end, the study needs to be narrow enough in order to keep a clear, concise focus throughout the process. I quickly learned that I wanted to conduct several research studies and needed to refocus my research on one specific area.

The methodology of the study proved to be quite a challenge as well. I knew I wanted to conduct a case study to examine and better understand the relationships between dialogue and inclusive schools, but I was unsure how to tackle that research question. In order to understand how principals used dialogue, I used a reputational approach of a panel of experts to identify principals who they considered to be inclusive. It was a challenge to identify criteria and align them with the literature and research topic in order to support the overall purpose of the study. Also, I wanted to capture actual dialogue between principals and their teachers, but I quickly
found limitations in doing so because of the lack of dialogue in schools. As a result, I relied heavily on principal interview, teacher survey data, and student focus group feedback to study my research question. In addition, I also learned that coding was a detailed and time-intensive process. I had hundreds of pages transcribed and it took hours to read, code, and analyze the data. Coding, while daunting at times, proved to be a considerable help when writing the finding section of the research.

If I could conduct this research all over again, there are several things I would do differently. First, I would try to find another middle school to study to have a comparison to the other middle school in the study. While I did not expect to find a range of schools and the principals use of dialogue, ultimately, that is what happened through the research study. As it was, I struggled to find a middle school through the reputational approach, so I would refocus my methodology to try to include another middle school and would compare it to the one in the study. Additionally, I would redesign some of my teacher survey questions to better define some specific terms that were included in the study. For example, questions were asked about inclusive practices, but I did not include a large amount of questions specific to dialogue. If I could conduct the research again, I would include specific questions about the time spent talking to the principal from an individual perspective because many of the questions asked for the principal’s dialogue with teams of teachers. I would also define what I meant by terms like transformative, transformational, and humanistic leadership so that teachers could differentiate between the terms. Finally, if I could do the research again, I would have included parent interviews as a piece of the data collection process. Parents are a critical component to many of the findings represented in the study, and it would have benefited the study to gain parents’ insights into their perceptions about having a voice at their respective schools.
For researchers interested in conducting case studies, I would make several recommendations. First, I would recommend that the methodology of the study include a variety of data collection strategies. I was able to use a variety of strategies to obtain data from many different participants, which was beneficial to my study. Since my study focused on principals, I could have only interviewed principals, but it was important to me to get a full range of responses from various members of the school community. Next, I would recommend that researchers keep a record of their data, coded by themes, for analyzing purposes because it enables the researcher to easily locate and find data, authors, quotations, and it assists with organizing data by themes. Finally, I would recommend that the case study method be used when a researcher is seeking to understand a complex issue or add strength to current research. A case study provides an in-depth study and allows the researcher to be able to understand the complexities of the subject(s) being studied. In my research, while I only studied three principals, I was able to provide an in-depth analysis and study of these principals with the case study methodology.

Recommendations

This study has found that dialogue was lacking in two of the three the cases examined in this study. I have found that dialogue in these cases is not occurring on a daily basis, sometimes as a result of time constraints and largely because principals did not view it as a priority. However, one principal in the study is using dialogue in an ontological sense to gain a deeper understanding of everyone in the school community, so it would appear that it is possible to infuse dialogue into the daily life of the school. I present my recommendations to be consistent
with my lessons learned under the headings of my conceptual framework: inclusive leadership, relationships, understanding, ontology, dialogue.

The following recommendations are based on the research conducted through this study. While some researchers suggest that little dialogue exists in school, there are few studies which have examined the principal’s use of dialogue and its relationship to inclusive schools. Therefore, these recommendations directly align to the research questions of this specific study and provide recommendations for school leaders who wish to create an inclusive school.

**Recommendations for School Leaders Related to Inclusive Leadership**

1. Educational leaders who want to create conditions for dialogue to exist in schools and classrooms might carefully consider intentionally carving time into their weekly calendars to provide the time, space, and opportunity for dialogue to occur.

2. School leaders who wish to make a difference in the lives of traditionally marginalized students, including low income and minority students, may want to reflect on how they use dialogue to understand the needs of marginalized students and parents and how teachers use dialogue to understand these needs.

**Recommendations for School Leaders Related to Relationships**

1. To build relationships, it is important to provide spaces and opportunities for all voices, especially those traditionally underserved and marginalized to be heard. Educational leaders must ensure that these spaces occur.

2. In order for teachers to better understand the importance of relationships, school leaders must provide opportunities for parents and students to dialogue about their concerns, suggestions, and questions about education, which, in turn, builds relationships and community.

3. Educational leaders, principals specifically, must engage in dialogue with teachers about the importance of building relationships with families outside of the classroom and provide some strategies. Students from low-income and minority backgrounds must feel like the school is a place for hope and opportunity.

**Recommendations for Educators Related to Community**

1. To build community, educators must realize that community goes beyond the literal sense of parents and students within a geographic boundary. It is based on the acceptance of
otherness (Furman, 2002). This kind of community is built through dialogic relationships, understanding, and knowing of others.

2. Educators must provide opportunities for all members of the community, including those traditionally underserved, to have a voice into decision-making processes and curriculum.

Recommendations Related to Dialogue in Schools

1. School principals should analyze how much dialogue is occurring in their current buildings to determine if it is truly dialogue or one-sided talk and if dialogue is actually developing a shared understanding.

2. Principals must reflect on their current school structures to determine whether or not they have equitable representation of marginalized groups on their leadership teams and within all school structures. It is critical for principals to be leaders and create structures for dialogue to exist and become part of the school community.

3. Because I found that dialogue in schools is minimal at best, principals might consider how to work collaboratively with teachers to provide opportunities for dialogue to occur. They could challenge teachers to reflect upon the ways in which they build relationships, community, and whether dialogue is a way of life in their school setting.

Further Research

I have begun to understand through this research the power and potential of dialogue in schools and would encourage other educational leaders and researchers to use and explore the concept more fully. I believe this study has demonstrated some connections between the separate parts of my conceptual framework (see Figure 2).
This study has therefore made a contribution to helping bridge the gaps in the literature between the concepts of inclusive leadership and dialogue. I have found that dialogue is a viable and useful tool for educational leaders to use in their daily practice, but it must be viewed as ontological as well in order to have greater impact on inclusive school communities. Hence, dialogue deserves to be given a more central place in the literature surrounding inclusive leadership and inclusive school communities. Similarly, the notion of community and relationships helps to demonstrate the importance of taking these elements into consideration when studying educational reform efforts like No Child Left Behind.

This study not only developed a better understanding of some issues related to federal reform mandates and their exclusionary practices, particularly the lack of dialogue in school
settings, it also raised some questions that might be investigated further. These relate both to my findings and conceptual framework and include the following:

1. How does dialogue between administrators and teachers impact student achievement?

2. What is the relationship between the use of dialogue in schools and the impact on parental participation?

3. How do deficit thinking practices impact dialogue in schools?

4. How do middle school principals engage in dialogue to create inclusive schools?

Other issues exist for further explanation. One of these relates to the issue of “getting teachers on board” and how administrators can use dialogic relationships to build trust and community within a school setting. Another issue relates to how administrators challenge deficit thinking models in schools and how deficit thinking may be eliminated by the usage of dialogue.

**Conclusion: Looking Forward**

Although I did not set out to assess how much dialogue is in schools, one of the most important findings of this study is that dialogue was lacking in schools and classrooms which were identified to be inclusive. Schools can make a difference in the educational achievement of all students, including those from a low socio-economic background and those from minority backgrounds. Although this study did not attempt to demonstrate the academic benefits of dialogue in schools and thus offers no evidence that dialogue improves student performance, the potential is there. Sometimes educators, and the public in general, tend to believe that students from minority backgrounds or low socioeconomic backgrounds cannot learn as well as their middle or upper class peers, and this is not true. Educators should not place blame on students for uncontrollable factors such as income, gender, or ethnicity. School leaders should not place blame on teachers for not understanding the root problems in education. Parents should not be
blamed for their lack of participation or for not caring if they do not have equitable access to
decision-making and curriculum in their children’s schools. As Ahmad’s story in Chapter 1
demonstrated, a deeper understanding can occur if the space for dialogue exists.

What this study has shown is that educational leaders, specifically school principals, can
make a difference to the learning environments of all students and thus, create an inclusive
environment through dialogue. I have examined various ways that educational leaders use
dialogue in schools to create an inclusive environment. I have found that there is a relationship
between dialogue and inclusive school communities for the cases examined in this study in that
the more dialogue there is, the more inclusive the environment. I have also uncovered that a
principal who builds community and relationships through not only using dialogue as a tool but
as the foundation of the work that she does every day can build trust within a staff and create an
inclusive school community. No Child Left Behind opened the door for accountability, yet
because of the mandate, schools have since been labeled as failing, even when they make
considerable growth and progress. I have shown that it is possible, even under these strict federal
mandates, that a principal from a school with a high population of students from minority and
low-socioeconomic backgrounds can view dialogue from an ontological perspective. Thus, it is
evident there is a strong relationship between dialogue and inclusive schools.

It is my hope that this study will lead educational leaders and policy makers to take
seriously the notions of dialogue and inclusive leadership practices and the potential for merging
the two to have a positive impact on student learning. It is my hope that they will examine more
carefully the structures of school systems and the impact on limiting minority parents’ voices
into decision-making processes and curriculum decisions. It is my hope that they will hear the
impact that dialogue can have, not only as a powerful tool, but also as a way of life to include all parents and students from minority backgrounds into the education system.

I do not intend to suggest that dialogue, either as a tool or as a foundational way of being, is easy to infuse into a school system, or that it will overcome all the difficulties of educating students. I posit that, based on findings of this study, educators should take seriously the lesson that dialogue, as a way of life, in the school community can bring positive results. Furthermore, I argue that the importance of building relationships and community through dialogic practices cannot be overstated in light of state and federal reform efforts. It would be my hope that this study will provide the impetus for other educators to analyze dialogue in their schools and provide equitable and accessible structures for meaningful dialogue to occur.
References


