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## The Pillars that Support School Principals in Cultivating Inclusive, Equitable Practices for Diverse Learners

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**The Pillars that Support School  
Principals in Cultivating Inclusive,  
Equitable Practices  
for Diverse Learners**

A Capstone in Education with a  
Concentration in Educational Leadership

By Karime Asaf, Doctor of Education

DePaul University  
College of Education

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June 2022

I approve the capstone of Karime Asaf

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is written in cursive and appears to read "Donna Kiel". Above the signature, the name "Donna Kiel, Ed.D." is printed in a small, black, sans-serif font.

April 28, 2022  
Date

Donna Kiel, Ed.D.  
Director, Office of Innovative Professional Learning  
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## Certification of Authorship

I certify that I am the sole author of this capstone. Any assistance received in the preparation of this capstone has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas, and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this capstone according to program guidelines as directed.



April 15, 2022

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Author Signature

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Date

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Special education students benefit in important ways from receiving academic and social-emotional support in the general education classroom and natural learning environment of their nondisabled peers. This capstone proposes a theory of action that can serve as the foundation for creating a leadership development program to support principals in promoting the adoption of inclusive practices for Diverse Learners in their schools. When properly organized, inclusive schools become cohesive, supportive communities where all members learn and value each other. Autoethnography was the methodological approach used to invoke, account for, and analyze experiential data from the author's 30 years of service as an educator within a large suburban school district in the Midwest region of the United States. The project captures the researcher's trajectory, evolution, and lessons learned as a teacher, case manager, principal, and principal supervisor through the lens of special education.

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## BACKGROUND

Before the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1975, children with disabilities had no legal right to participate in public education (VanderPloeg, 2019). Most students with disabilities stayed home without schooling opportunities, and others were institutionalized (U.S. Department of Education (2022)). In the 1990 reauthorization of PL 94-142, the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reworked to establish guidelines for free appropriate public education (FAPE).

IDEA specifies that students with disabilities must receive special education and related services in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015). As stated in Section 1412 (a) (5):

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

The practice of placing students with disabilities in restrictive learning environments (i.e., a designated special education program) based on space availability, staff credentials, schedules, or other surmountable school barriers, poses an issue of compliance with PL 94-142 and engenders discrimination and segregation.

My current position in an urban Midwest school district grants me access to elementary schools for the purpose of supporting the leadership development of principals. During my visits, I occasionally see students with disabilities in resource classrooms where special education teachers are doing their best to narrow basic skill gaps while keeping the students engaged and motivated. In some cases, they also assist them with independent functioning and behavior modification goals. Nonetheless, I often wonder whether some of these students would be better served in a general education classroom.

In more restrictive learning environments, many students with disabilities are asked to complete repetitive, lower-level skill drills in an attempt to remediate deficits. The sad reality, however, is that students usually fall further behind academically in these separate environments, and their behavior is also often negatively impacted. Another problem is

that special education labels tend to be a sort of life sentence for most Diverse Learners; full reintegration into age- and grade-appropriate education alongside their nondisabled peers is less likely as time passes because their learning gaps tend to widen—with or without disability-related supports (Thomas & Loxley, 2022).

Furthermore, the “easy way out” practice of placing students with disabilities in restrictive learning environments (i.e., a designated special education program) based on space availability, staff credentials, schedules, or other surmountable school barriers, poses an issue of compliance with PL 94-142 and engenders discrimination and segregation. As educators, we have the responsibility to collectively explore and adopt more equitable and conscientious ways to serve and prepare this fragile population of children and youth. Our current practices perpetuate academic and socioemotional failure, disengagement, low expectations, and myriad other negative repercussions that individuals with disabilities often endure as they grow older and navigate their adult lives. The importance of engaging in this “critical reflection and explicit discussion is to develop leaders’ capacity to make schools more equitable and to address educators’ lack of awareness about students’ experiences and issues of inequity to counter ingrained deficit-based orientations” (Poekert et al., 2020).

Thus, this capstone aims to answer the question of how district leaders support principals to ensure LRE compliance while simultaneously developing the leadership competencies required from principals to cultivate equitable, inclusive learning environments for the Diverse Learners in their schools.

## KEY TERMS

**Diverse Learners (DLs):** Diverse Learners include children and students of all abilities from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Cardozo & Vazquez 2020). For this project, the term refers to students with identified disabilities who are eligible for special education and have an Individualized Education Plan.

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP):** An IEP is a legal document that outlines the special education and related services that a student with an identified disability receives (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** The LRE is part of the IEP and refers to the placement in which the student with an identified disability receives special education and related services. The U.S. Department of Education (2020) mandates that “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities must be educated with children who do not have disabilities. Special classes, separate schools, or other removal of children

with disabilities from the regular educational environment may occur only if the nature or severity of the child's disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily." U.S. Department of Education (2022).

**Inclusive Education (IE):** IE is rooted in social justice. It calls educators, school leaders, and policymakers to examine the attitudes that exclude and segregate students based on disability, race, language, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status, while valuing diversity and the unique contribution each child has to offer (Bui et al., 2010). According to Bui et al. (2010), IE requires proper training, support, flexibility, and resources to properly respond to the needs of *all* students.

**Equity:** Refers to justice or proportional fairness. Educational equity means that each child receives what they need to achieve their full academic and social potential (National Equity Project, 2020).

## PROCESS

*If we are too busy, if we are carried away every day by our projects, our uncertainty, our craving, how can we have the time to stop and look deeply into the situation—on our own situation, the situation of our beloved one, the situation of our family and of our community, and the situation of our nation and of the other nations?*

—Thích Nhất Hạnh

## METHOD

I used a qualitative research method known as autoethnography to invoke, reflect on, and analyze the intersection of special education and my 30 years of service as an educator. My experiences and observations were the data for the study, which reveals a narrative of struggle and the breakthrough roles I have played in special education, both personally and professionally. This transformative qualitative research approach allowed me to critically examine the responsibility I have in positively impacting the educational space I currently occupy as a principal supervisor in an urban school district in the Midwest. As a research method, "autoethnography is grounded in postmodern philosophy and is linked to a growing debate about reflectivity and voice in social research. The intent of autoethnography is to ... make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression" (Wall, 2006, p. 6). I am also aware that autoethnography is often criticized for being subjective, individualized, self-centered, therapeutic, and unreliable, as it depends on memory and interpretation of experiences in the past (Delamont, 2007).

My hope is that this research can provide a foundation for those supporting and strengthening the leadership capacity of school leaders to promote inclusive, equitable practices for Diverse Learners in their schools. The methodology for this project was selected as it “confronts dominant forms of representation and power, in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflection, representational spaces that exclude or marginalize certain individuals and groups” (Tierney, 1998, p. 52). In sum, autoethnography aims to interrogate power, and resist oppression (Ellis, 1991), which is the underlying purpose of this study.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Official documents, journal entries, retrieved electronic communication, meeting and training agendas, interviews, and informal conversations with parents, students, teachers, colleagues, and special education experts were used to select, code, and analyze the trends that supported the findings of the project.

I coded the data gathered to trace the trajectory and significance of my professional and personal life as it intersected with the field of special education. I organized the data in clusters as different themes emerged. Figure 1 outlines my relevant lived experiences, which I have categorized according to the level of segregation and inclusion I was either contributing to or noticing around me. Two periods (1997–1999 and 2007–2009) were excluded from this capstone since my actions had less impact on special education during those times.

### Figure 1

*Autoethnographic Narrative Clusters*

My Special Education Life	
1988	ES1: Start of my education career in a primarily bilingual classroom
<b>1. Sad Stories: The Way We Used to Be</b>	
1991	ES2 First job as bilingual special education teacher
2002	My two sons receive IEPs
2005	Tracking special education compliance for the district office
2003	HS1 Phase 1: ISS, OSS, push-outs, homelessness, prison pipeline
<b>2. Bending the Road to More Equitable Practices</b>	
2004	HS1 Phase 2: Closing the ramp school.

2010	HS2: Learning the profound lesson that every child can learn
<b>3. New Era: The Way We Now Know How to Be</b>	
2012–2019	ES3: From state-focused monitoring to 100% inclusion
<b>4. Passing It On: Supporting Principals on Their Inclusion Journeys</b>	
2021	Principal supervisor, cheerleader, champion of inclusive practices

*Note.* Most but not all entries are listed in chronological order because at some points in my career my practice did not progress linearly toward inclusion but regressed to segregation. Other periods were not included as they had little to no relevance to the capstone. In this chart, ES stand for elementary school and HS for high school. The numbers 1, 2, 3 refer to different ES or HS locations where I worked.

The first section lists the start of my career as an educator, when I had basic knowledge in the field but was not actively engaged in any specific special education activity. It marks the time when I discovered that the skills I had were not sufficient to tend to the academic needs of all the students in my first bilingual classroom.

The four clusters that emerged from the data collection were (1) Sad Stories: The Way We Used to Be; (2) Bending the Road to More Equitable Practices; (3) New Era: The Way We Now Know How to Be; and (4) Passing It On: Supporting Principals on Their Inclusion Journeys. Each category has subcategories that break down the themes further.

Cluster 1 recounts events that took place at an elementary school and district office, the first phase of my work at a high school, and my personal experience of having children diagnosed with disabilities. These stories are categorized as the “Dark Ages” of my professional career, when I either contributed to segregation or was working in an environment that was not tailored for inclusion.

Cluster 2 involves the transition period in which I incorporated more inclusive practices and began to see the importance of including Diverse Learners in general education.

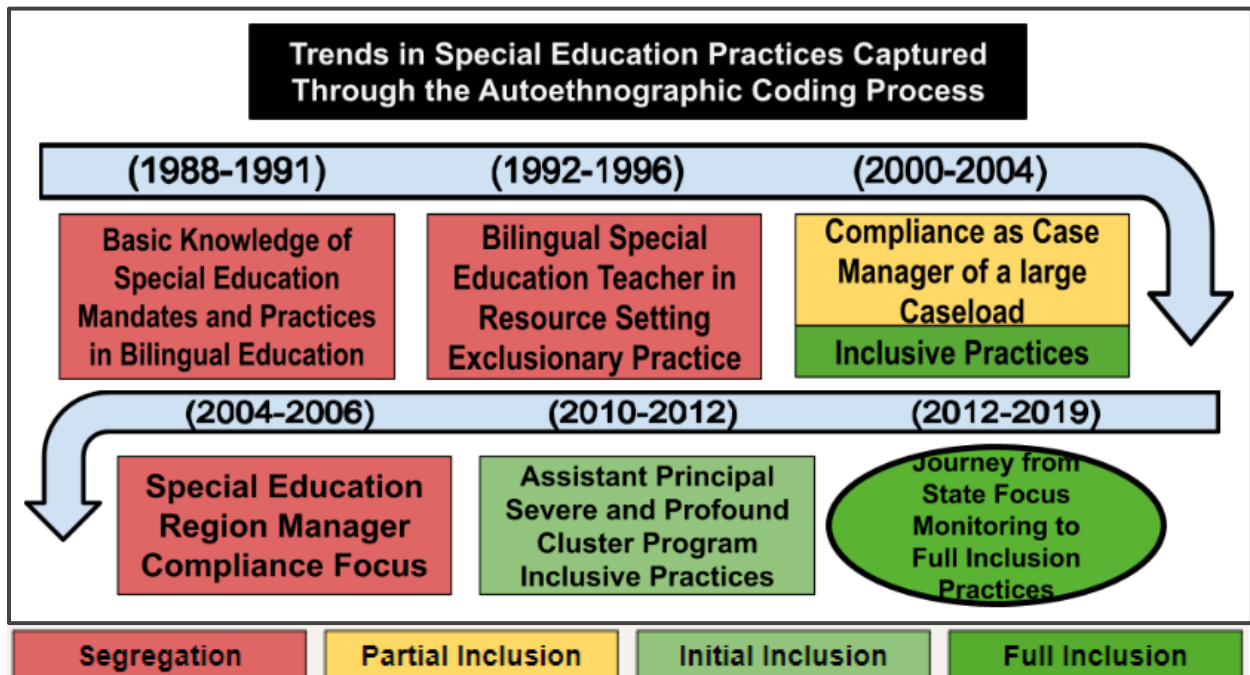
Cluster 3 describes the trajectory and culmination of the most significant experience I had with inclusive education while I was a principal of an elementary school.

Cluster 4 presents the project’s Theory of Practice to support the work of district staff entrusted with the leadership development of principals. The emergent themes or pillars create the foundation for a professional development plan for principals that promotes inclusion and equity practices in their schools.

Figure 2 illustrates the next step in the experiential data analysis process, which was to color-code a timeline to create clusters that identify my contribution to either segregation

or inclusion in my practice. The last entry (2012–2019) discusses the seven-year period that took the elementary school I led as a principal from 100% segregation to 100% inclusion. This is outlined in Figure 3 later in the capstone.

**Figure 2**  
*Trends in Special Education Practices Captured Through the Autoethnographic Coding Process*



Note. Sections of time characterized by my personal contribution to segregation or inclusive practices, color-coded to indicate segregation (red), inclusion (green), and transition (yellow).

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE


Special education is constantly present in my current work. When I go to schools, I visit classrooms with the principals I support so we can monitor the quality of education students receive. I pay special attention to the supports provided for Diverse Learners to access high-quality, grade-level-appropriate, standards-based instruction. In some classrooms, I see well-adjusted Diverse Learners included and fully engaged in learning with their nondisabled peers. The sad reality, however, is that in some schools, the practice of segregating Diverse Learners when most of them can be supported and included in the general education classroom is still alive. If they are in the general education classroom for part of the day, it is not uncommon to see them completing rote tasks (such as copying words or colors) while the rest of the class works on grade-level academic tasks. For Diverse Learners, the result is differentiated work that is below grade level, repetitive, and disjointed.

This section outlines the experiential data of my autoethnographic narrative, which contains descriptions of experiences with special education in the different stages of my career. As I engaged in this reflectivity exercise, I connected the past with my current role to make sense of my career trajectory and assess the areas where we still need to improve our practices as educators.

### **SAD STORIES: THE WAY WE USED TO BE**

The first cluster of stories marks the starting point of the journey, one that evolved from the common practice of removing or segregating Diverse Learners from the general education classroom during the early 1990s, a time when special education was still a relatively new field.

I started my teaching career in 1989 as a bilingual teacher in an urban school district in the Midwest. There were a handful of students in my first-grade class that I could not teach because they had different skill levels, learning styles, and socioemotional needs. I never blamed the children for this. I did not complain about their home language, culture, socioeconomic status, or parents. I knew that the problem resided in my capacity to teach them, and I was committed to expanding my instructional repertoire. I came across a scholarship opportunity for a local university master's program that included a concentration in reading, bilingual/multicultural education, and special education. I took advantage of it, and the program provided me with knowledge that has been vital



throughout decades of service as an educator and school leader in public, private, charter, elementary, and high school institutions.

## **Separation Means Segregation**


After completing a master's degree in special education, I was convinced I had the superpower to reach any and all students who had difficulty learning or behaved in ways that were considered unacceptable in school. And to a certain extent, I did. I gained a deep knowledge and understanding of critical pedagogy, second-language acquisition, clinical teaching, and reading and behavior modification strategies. I also understood psychometric tools, how they are normed, and the bias and negative repercussions they have on education and opportunities for Black, Brown, and bilingual students, all of whom tend to underperform on these standardized tests (Valdés & Figueroa 1994). The waters where special education meet second-language acquisition are murky. Too often the latter masquerades as a learning disability.

Empirical evidence shows that minority overrepresentation in special education programs is occurring because of misidentification based on race, ethnicity, or language use (Morgan et al., 2018). There is an ever-present need to intensify the use of culturally sensitive and language-sensitive disability screenings and evaluation procedures to ensure that disability identification procedures are accurately being used for English Language Learners (ELLs). By ensuring that minority children with disabilities are being appropriately recognized, the cultural competence of school professionals is increased and strengthened. Universal screening, which has been proposed as a method for addressing racial disparities in both gifted education and pediatric care, may similarly help address racial disparities in special education (Morgan et al., 2018). Another valuable intervention would be providing interpreters who are fluent in a parent's native language so that they have accurately translated documents and materials, which would allow them to be more included in the placement of their child in differentiated education programs.

Becoming a certified bilingual special education teacher made me a rare commodity, so I had quite a few jobs offers. A beautiful, vibrant, high-needs, majority Latinx school community in South Side Chicago was the perfect fit for me. The principal who hired me was a great role model. She cared deeply about each student, her teachers, and the parents of her school community. The four years I worked under her leadership had a lasting impact on my career as an educator and school leader.

With 900 students, the school was overcrowded, so I had to share a classroom with two other special education teachers. But I didn't mind. That summer, I read the IEPs of the Diverse Learners on my caseload and prepared to receive them in September. I have clear






memories of the second-floor hallways where I made my rounds, picking up students and bringing them to my little space on the northwest corner of our shared resource classroom. Most of the students were compliant, shy Latinx children, and a few of them were vivacious African American children, who at times required some persuading to be removed from their classrooms.

I did not know enough to question the efficacy or equity concerns engendered in this segregation practice, but the children did, somewhere deep inside them. I truly believed that segregating these children from their peers to teach them separately was the right thing to do. I know now that pulling them out of their *homeroom* was counterproductive and, in many ways, damaging. The message they received through the act of removal and separation was that they were not like the rest of the students who got to stay in class. They knew what their peers thought of them. Regardless of what we did as adults to prevent it, these children could count on getting the hurtful reminders of their peers' perceptions of them during lunch, recess, transitions—and even during class. Children are impressionable and easily internalize, enact, and believe the messages they receive from others.

I tried to make things bearable and appealing for Diverse Learners by adorning their worksheets and notebooks with stickers, giving them rewards, playing instructional games, and granting them “free time” on the one computer we had in our resource classroom. I read them stories they could not yet decode on their own, and I asked them comprehension questions that I frequently ended up answering myself. I flashed 3 x 5 index cards with high-frequency words in front of them hoping they would recognize them and read them back to me the next day, only to discover that most would disappear from their memory. I taught these sight words in isolation, out of context, and without purpose or real meaning. I did my best to teach them English phonics with my heavy Spanish accent, but my efforts seldom produced the desired outcomes.

My teaching at the university's lab during my clinical teaching practicum had gone well. But in the real world—specifically the high-needs, overcrowded school where I worked—I had to teach small groups of multiage, multi-grade Diverse Learners with a range of skills and different levels of English proficiency. My caseload included teaching an average of 20 Diverse Learners daily. Like all children, my students had their preferred learning modalities, and I had to plan accordingly. The most meaningful learning experiences I could muster happened during the rare occasions when I could sneak in a group project. Learning together, and collaborating on presentations and artifacts that the students could proudly take home to their parents, was rewarding for all of us. During the early '90s, we didn't have access to electronic devices, so we indulged in trips to the public library to check out books and look through encyclopedias and *National Geographic*



magazines for our research. The migration of monarch butterflies, weather catastrophes, and the Milky Way were the most popular topics. The case manager would promptly redirect me to focus on meeting the students' IEP goals, remediate their deficits, and return to the repetitive, meaningless worksheets and flashcards that would inevitably revert us back to the undesirable normal.

## **We Had No IDEA**

Each special education teacher was assigned a grade band from kindergarten to grade 2, grades 3 to 5, and grades 6 to 8. To most efficiently meet all the minutes in our IEPs, nearly every Diverse Learner was placed in the resource classroom at the same time. We wanted to be compliant, but in our efforts to fulfill our students' IEP minutes, we made the grave error of placing our schedules above our Diverse Learners' needs. This practice does not comply with IDEA, which states that we were "not allowed to make placement decisions based solely on factors such as: configuration of delivery systems; availability of educational or related services; availability of space; or administrative convenience" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 3).

To make matters worse, we produced "cookie-cutter IEPs." As the term implies, most of our IEPs, instead of being individualized, placed our Diverse Learners in a more restrictive learning environment—our resource room. This malpractice is very easy to identify by looking at the LRE distribution of a school. Under IDEA, "the setting in which the child's program and services [are] implemented must be made on an individual basis in light of each child's unique needs" (VanderPloeg, 2019, p. 2). A justification for the removal of students from the general education classroom is required, yet most of our IEPs recycled statements we picked up from the examples provided to us during district trainings. The only content areas with the possibility of inclusion were science and social studies—provided, of course, we could fit them into our schedule. Reading and math were always in a separate setting.

Another sad reality was that although we knew collaboration with the general education teachers was the best practice, it rarely happened because we did not have compatible planning times. Quick words exchanged in the hallway or in the teachers' lounge was the extent of the collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers at that time. During this part of my career as a special education teacher, I had a general understanding of the rules to follow, but I did not have the specific training or systems needed to serve Diverse Learners in effective, inclusive settings—where I now know that most, if not all of them, belonged. I simply did not know how to be more effective in reaching my students through inclusive practices. A separate, segregated special education classroom placement, which is often referred to as "resource" prevailed.


## **What About the Parents?**

During this stage in my career, I regularly translated for Spanish-speaking parents during IEP meetings. Mothers and grandmothers generally attended these meetings, and most of them were first-generation Mexican immigrants working in factories, sometimes holding more than one job at a time, and still struggling to make ends meet. I could see their faces transition from disbelief, to confusion, to sadness, to guilt, and finally to abnegation as the meetings progressed and I retold the story of their children's lives through the medical, psychological, social, emotional, and educational interpretations of the experts at the table. They almost never had questions; instead, they would remain silent, almost in a trance, trying to absorb and calibrate what they were hearing versus what they knew about their children. I would intentionally replace some of the terminal labels with softer descriptions to leave some room for hope and make the determinations sound a little less tragic, a little less final.

After finding a student eligible for special education, their parents would need to sign and give consent for their child to receive special education services. I could sense that some mothers felt in their hearts that this was not quite right, not what was optimal for their children, but they had no choice, and so they would provide consent. Many interactions with parents during these IEP meetings felt uneasy, sad, and generally uncomfortable. Despite these feelings, I thought this was the way things needed to be, but as I reflect on those experiences with what I know now, I realize that other options exist. I often think about the children who were in my caseload during those first four years of my career. I wonder if they graduated from high school and what kind of life they now have as adults in their late 30s. Did the separate special education classroom in elementary school have negative cumulative effects in their life?

## **Special Education Hits Home**

I do not have to look very far to see that restrictive special education placement can affect individuals as they become adults. My two sons were evaluated and found to be eligible for special education when they were in elementary school. I migrated to the United States from Colombia as a young adult, and I was still acquiring formal, academic English when they were placed in special education. Although I had the privilege of being in college during this time, I had much in common with the mothers of the Diverse Learners I used to translate for during IEP meetings in the early '90s. I can relate to how they felt because the special education referral, evaluation, eligibility, service delivery, and placement processes are all painfully complex. Like those mothers, I relied on the system to do what was best for my children. Like them, I also felt guilty, ashamed, and worried about my role




in their diagnosed disability and educational fate. I signed documents to give consent without asking too many questions, mainly because I did not know what to ask.

Later on, through the assigned readings from the special education preparation program I was enrolled in, I found that medicating my youngest son, as it is frequently recommended by pediatricians and appreciated by schools, could have negative repercussions, so I postponed treatment until he was older so he could make that decision for himself. When he was in high school, he opted to take medication to help him focus. Unfortunately, he suffered with a dependency to this medication that lasted for years and continued into his adulthood. I believe that the way he grew up—with frequent school transfers, his father and I going through a divorce, and my long work hours—contributed to his inability to focus. Perhaps supporting him through counseling and not separating him from his peers would have been more beneficial as he faced those issues.

My oldest son was diagnosed with a learning disability in fifth grade. I now know enough to ascertain that his basic skill gaps could have been easily remediated with support in the general education classroom. This could have spared him from falling further and further behind as he went through middle school, high school, and beyond. His school records had him labeled as Spanish-dominant at the time he was referred, which contributed to his placement in special education.

It is interesting to note that while Black and Brown students in schools with few minorities tend to be overrepresented in special education in relation to their predicted rates, they are often underrepresented in heavily minority schools (Elder et al., 2021). Roey Ahram (2021) found that as the proportion of white students increased in a school, the risk for minority students of being classified as having a lower-status disability (e.g., intellectual disability) increased. However, as the proportion of White students decreased, White students' risk of being classified as having a higher-status disability (e.g., speech and language impairment) also increased. This means that regardless of the racial makeup of their school, students are being wrongfully segregated based on factors other than their academic abilities. School leaders must adopt new approaches to better understand how and why segregation continues to live in our schools as a way to prepare to address these urgent systematic equity issues.

It seems unreasonable to me that children are so often wrongfully placed in special education, separated from their peers, and labeled with a disability simply for exhibiting behavior that is appropriate to their situation, especially considering how many factors could have contributed to it. There is always the possibility for extenuating circumstances in any child's life, be it divorce, an unstable home environment, having a native language




other than English, or a parents' immigration status. Educators often don't realize the blame they place on children when they force them to be removed from a classroom because they do not learn the same way as others. These children may well have the capacity to learn, but instead of being taught through a different method or being provided resources such as counseling, they are segregated and negatively set apart for the rest of their academic careers. Black and Latinx boys are wrongfully being placed in special education for remediations to their behavior or language more than for real academic problems (Hughley, 2020, p. 46). My sons had difficulty finishing their schooling. However, as I assess their ability to learn and function throughout their childhood, youth, and adulthood, I know with certainty that they did not have the disabilities they were assigned. It is abundantly clear to me now that our racial, ethnic, and language background played a key role in their placement.

### **Special Education at the High School**

After six years of working in a school where the impact I had on special education was not significant enough to include in this autoethnography, I accepted a position as a special education case manager at a high school that served roughly 2,500 students. The demographics at the time indicated that close to 100% of students were Black and Brown students in an underserved, high-needs community. At one point, I was responsible for managing over 400 IEPs. Overseeing special education at a large high school meant that I oversaw the largest department in the school. However, the only aspect of special education that I could impact was compliance, and only by holding an average of five IEP meetings a day. IEPs were still written by hand in the early 2000s, which is not as efficient as the electronically processed ones that exist as I write this in 2022. The role of case manager increased my understanding and empathy toward the work that is required of case managers who strive to increase their competency in adopting equitable practices.

### **General and Special Education Collaboration During IEP Meetings**

In an IEP meeting, the special education team convenes to make decisions that are documented in the Diverse Learner's IEP. The people who are required by law to attend the IEP meetings are the student's parent(s) or legal guardian; at least one of the student's general education teachers (if the student attends general education classes); at least one special education teacher; a representative of the local educational agency who is qualified to provide or supervise special education programs, knows about the general education curriculum and the availability of the resources that can be offered; and someone who can explain the evaluation results.




Having a general education teacher participate in decision-making for Diverse Learners during IEP meetings is a mandate. As a case manager, the only general education teachers I could reliably secure were art and PE teachers. English, math, science, and social science content area teachers were rarely available or would bluntly refuse to join the special education meetings, remarking, “I’m not getting paid extra to do that” or “No, I need my prep period.” The main reason general education teachers needed to join special education meetings was to sign the first page of the document, which is a mandate, and most of them would leave soon after that without meaningfully contributing to the important discussion and decision-making process. (These days, parents must sign their consent for IEP team members to leave before the meeting is over to avoid this.)

There was such a disconnect between the general and the special education teachers that once during an IEP meeting, a general education teacher referred to the special education inclusion teacher who was providing services in his classroom as the “intrusion teacher.” This was not just a Freudian slip; he giggled as he said it, while the special education teacher (who was present at the meeting) lowered her head. Another general education teacher kept thanking the “teacher aide”—in reality, a certified special education teacher who supported Diverse Learners in her classroom—for all the assistance.

These were the Dark Ages of inclusion. Very few educators knew how to plan and execute lessons effectively through true co-teaching. As the name suggests, co-teaching is defined as two or more teachers planning, instructing, and evaluating together (Rabin, 2020). The traditional model for student-teaching has remained the same since its inception in the 1920s. The process of becoming a teacher involves observing a mentor teacher until they are ready to teach independently with no collaboration (Raben, 2020). Given the increasing diversity of today’s schools and the importance of teacher accountability, it is important to question current practices and advocate for more collaborative teaching.

The continuum of services offered at this high school was broader than that of the first school I worked at in the early ’90s where we primarily placed Diverse Learners in separate classroom to receive resource services. There was consultation, inclusion, resource, and instructional or self-contained placements available. In consultation direct services were not provided. Instead, the general and the special education teacher collaborated to ensure the student was receiving accommodations in the general education classroom. Inclusion looked like a special education teacher pushing in the general education classroom to support the Diverse Learners. Resource meant that the special education teacher removed the student from the general education classroom to provide services in a separate setting, similar to what I did during my first four years as a bilingual special education teacher. A more restrictive setting was instructional, which was a self-contained classroom for Diverse Learners who did not participate in general education for the




duration of the class period. The last level of restriction was the cluster or self-contained program where Diverse Learners with highest needs stayed in the special education classroom with the same teacher all day.

### **Detention, Suspension, Expulsion, and the Wheel of Bad Fortune**

There is a significantly disproportionate representation of racially marginalized students in special education (Barton-Vasquez, 2018). In a study by Ahram et al. (2021), children who exhibited behavioral challenges, especially African American children, were more likely to be assessed for special education than children who exhibited academic challenges. Advocating for a student to be labeled as a Diverse Learner often prevents them from reaching their full academic potential. Overrepresentation can, and often does, result in students experiencing the effects of profiling and racial biases throughout the school year or entire academic careers (Hughley 2020). For young children of color, prolonged exposure to racial discrimination has the potential to result in debilitating psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019).

While I worked as case manager at the large, urban, underperforming high school, I noticed that many of my male Latinx and African American Diverse Learners would often find themselves in the basement of the school serving detentions and in-school suspensions (ISS). They would end up there by refusing to serve detentions assigned to them for misbehaving in class or for other actual or perceived acts of disruption or disrespect. Noncompliance in the detention room—such as talking, getting up from their seat, not asking for permission to use the bathroom, chewing gum, putting their head down, sleeping, not removing their hat or hoodie, not completing the unrelated work packages they received, talking back to the monitor, and arguing or fighting with others—would cause them to receive additional detention time, or they would be upgraded in the discipline hierarchy to out-of-school suspension (OSS), the ultimate disengage and the most potent predictor of dropping out and other undesirable outcomes. Students who frequented the detention room became desensitized to all these strategies intended to set them straight.

Diverse Learners with behavioral or emotional disabilities were frequent flyers of this exclusionary, punitive, harmful, and cyclical discipline approach. I have a distinct memory of a time when the special education team could not locate a Diverse Learner who was due for a reevaluation. The student was not in the classroom, but he appeared in the system as being in attendance. I discovered that he spent 15 school days out of the classroom with detentions that turned into ISS and then OSS. Many students in situations like this eventually drop out, become involuntarily unenrolled, or are “pushed out,” a practice that was common at my school at the time. Parents of these Diverse Learners



would come to the main office trying to reenroll them to avoid losing the government benefits that having an identified disability granted their children. However, these parents would be told their children were dropped for excessive absences. In other words, they were illegally expelled. When this happened, I called the homes of the Diverse Learners who would suddenly but predictably disappear from the system and ask the parents to bring them back and ask for me in the office. I would then firmly request that the office staff reenroll them. In some cases, the drop-enroll cycle was repeated a few times over in the span of one to three years. I knew this was happening more often than I could keep track of, and as a result, other students would fall under my push-out radar and then be permanently marked as lost or as dropouts.


The type of student I advocated for was seen as undesirable to the school because they usually posed behavioral challenges and brought down school ratings with absences, low scores, and high suspension rates. When it came to ISS and OSS reporting, there was also a practice of having students go home with a parent before the school day was over, which is a form of removal that does not get reported as a suspension. Other students were not allowed to come back to school until a parent came in for a conference with the administration. Days would often go by before this happened.

### **The School-to-Prison-to-Poverty-to-Perish Pipeline**

Although American educators are predominantly Caucasian females, American public-school classrooms currently—for the first time in history—consist of a majority of non-white students. The disproportionate placement and inadequate instruction that is given to minority students limits their academic achievement and motivation, which instigates delinquency behavior, expulsion, and (frequently) illegal behaviors or even imprisonment. This phenomenon is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Issues such as punitive discipline models, limited access to general education classrooms, and low high school graduation rates contribute to this phenomenon (Sacks, 2019).

A couple of years ago, I was walking through a large park located near this particular high school, when a homeless man, about 30 and sitting on a park bench, called out, “Ms. Asaf! Ms. Asaf!” I initially wanted to continue walking and ignore the man, but I he’d called out my name. Shocked and a bit fearful, I could not recognize him at first. But it was Francisco, one of the Latinx students whose IEP I processed yearly while I was the case manager at his high school. I had flashbacks of some of the statements made about him during those meetings. His reading skills were at third-grade level, and he was diagnosed with intermittent, explosive disorder (IED). Needless to say, his educational career was not a successful one.





Francisco seemed happy to see me, but soon the realization of his current circumstances got ahold of him, and his original excitement turned to perceivable shame. He was dirty, his clothes were thorn, and his hair and beard were messy, long, and tangled. What was most striking was the defeat and sadness I could read in his eyes. I sat next to him, and we talked for a while. He explained that he tried to go to an alternative school after he got kicked out of his high school, but that new school was just not for him either, so he left. He called himself stupid a few times during the recounting, and I signaled my disapproval of his choice of words. But who was I to intervene this late in the game? He shared that he had been staying with a cousin after his grandmother died but started hanging with bad company, and eventually alcohol and drugs put him on the streets. He then looked down and asked me if I remembered Shorty, his friend. I said yes. His friend was also a Diverse Learner who attended the same high school during the years I worked there. He was always happy, smiling, and in trouble. Francisco and Shorty were always together. He then shared that his friend ended up in jail, and soon after he got out, he was shot by another gang member and died. Francisco paused. We were both silent for what seemed like a long time. He finally said, "I miss Shorty," and continued to stare at the murky water in the shallow pond in front of us.

I did not keep track of the time we spent sitting at his bench, but I was aware of the heaviness in my heart as I heard him relate his many losses and the tragedy of his past and hardship of his present life. The time for me to go came. I gave him a hug, a silent blessing, and the last \$35 that I had in my pocket and walked away. Tears were rolling down my cheeks as I hurried to reach my car so I could sob in private. I felt deeply saddened, empty, and devastated. Although I had tried to help him and had brought him back to school a couple of times, he was experiencing drug addiction, poverty, and homelessness in part because the education system I was part of did not serve him well. I was no longer working at the high school where I met Francisco and Shorty, but I felt partly responsible for their fate.

### **District Office: Compliance, Compliance, Compliance!**

The district representative that monitored my work as case manager referred me for a position to support a cluster of schools in the same geographical area with special education compliance. This was a short but notable experience I had in the world of special education. In this new role, I supervised close to 30 case managers to ensure compliance with IEP and reevaluation deadlines, service delivery, and adherence to federal and state mandates. I attended meetings when my approval was needed for Special Education Classroom Assistants (SECAs) and Child Welfare Attendants (CWAs) support to start or continue. I also approved separate, therapeutic placement for students who

needed a more restrictive learning environment and provided professional development for case managers and school principals.

I also had the opportunity to see schools that were taking intentional steps to include and support Diverse Learners in general education classrooms. I was very interested in finding more about this practice, but it was not until seven years later when I became principal at an elementary school that I understood why creating inclusive school communities was an important equitable practice.

I did not stay long in this position because I felt scattered traveling all over the city to visit the schools I supported. The nature of the job was strictly focused on compliance, and I missed being connected to a school community. A year after I left, the district divided up the work of the position I had, and another special education specialist was added to support teachers with instruction. These two positions created a more balanced approach to support schools with both compliance and instruction.


## **BENDING THE ROAD TO MORE EQUITABLE PRACTICES**

The next cluster of the autoethnographic narrative marks a short but critical period in my segregation to inclusion journey. The experience took place in two different high schools; in the first one I served as case manager in one, and in the second one as assistant principal. I held the district job in between these two high schools but the events are not listed in chronological order because these two similar but separate experiences built on one another to help me see the benefit and importance of implementing inclusive practices in our schools.

### **A New Home School**

Toward the end of my time as case manager at the previously mentioned high school, I received a call from the district office to attend a meeting regarding a special education school that was closing near us. The closing school was built in 1833, and although it was a beacon of segregation, it was also one of the very rare, almost nonexistent opportunities students with disabilities had at the time, before the Section 504 regulation required school districts to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The meeting informed us of the plan to transfer the 540 elementary and high school students with physical and mental disabilities who attended the school to the 23 neighborhood schools each of us represented. The news did not report this as a school




closing but as a plan to remodel it (Conklin, 2004), but at the time I am writing this in 2022, the building remains closed as a school. The school was originally built with good intentions but failed to evolve with the times as issues with segregation became problematic for the educational system. “On May 17, 1954, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous ruling in the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. State-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th amendment and was therefore unconstitutional” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). By the time it closed, many were against the segregation it represented for students with disabilities and the marginalization that kept them from richer opportunities and the education among nondisabled peers they all needed and deserved.

One of my Latinx classmates in my special education master’s program attended that school. During class discussions, he would share the experiences of his elementary and high school years at that institution. His were not pleasant memories, and they impacted me profoundly then and 15 years later. When I participated in its closing, I could almost hear him describe the main entrance, the hallways, and the classrooms as I walked through the building. I visualized him entering through those doors and eating in the lunchroom where we met to discuss the transition of the children who were still attending there.

We held several meetings to plan the logistics of transferring the 540 K–12 students and ensure that the transition was as seamless and efficient as possible. Some of the procedures and conditions of the ramp school, as we started calling it, shocked me. For example, the wheelchair-bound students would arrive in the morning in school buses, and the bus attendants would leave them by the entrance as if they were parking inanimate objects. Moments later, the SECAs would pick up the students and take them to the lunchroom to have breakfast. A WCA would feed and provide personal care with feeding and toileting to the students who needed it. Each student’s dedicated SECA would then take them to the classroom. If they were dedicated, that meant that they would stay with the Diverse Learner except when they had their breaks. At dismissal time, the reverse process would take place until the bus attendant transported the wheelchair-bound students to the school bus to go home. During my transition visits to the school, I noticed that some staff members were kind and gentle with the children. Others did not seem to have the same level of regard for them. Another deplorable condition that stuck in my mind during my visits was the stench of urine as I walked in and through some parts of the building. Many of these children and young adults wore diapers, and they were not always kept dry or clean.


Before the school year was over and the ramp school’s doors permanently closed, the case managers from the receiving schools visited several times to meet and interview



special education teachers, SECAs, and CWAs to transition them with the students to the new schools. Many of them came along with the students to our school, and this gave us and the students a sense of comfort and continuity. My special education department was even larger than before. I now managed transportation, bus aids, SECAs, and the CWAs who tended to the special self-care needs of the students, which included mobility, feeding, monitoring of nursing needs, and in some cases toileting. There were also the additional related service providers that offered speech and language, physical, and occupational therapy, among others.

At the school, some of the administrators and staff were quite apprehensive about receiving a program that served students with such high needs. Most of our new students were nonverbal and had multiple disabilities. A section of our school needed to be adapted for personal care and proper special education classroom spaces to accommodate ambulatory devices and the other assistive technology equipment that was required to support them. About 25 Diverse Learners who previously attended the ramp school transitioned to our high school. We did everything in our power to ensure that they were safe and felt welcomed. The transfer process was complex but smooth, with only one memorable incident.

When I invoke the memory of the transition, I get flashbacks of the first day our new group of Diverse Learners arrived in early July to attend their extended school year (ESY) program in the summer. The school buses arrived along with the bus attendants, and many of the SECAs we had just hired from the ramp school were ready to receive them. We were excited to see our students come through the main entrance for the first time! We were also nervous, knowing that to serve them well, we needed to expand our capacity in many ways. The Diverse Learners went to the cafeteria for breakfast and received personal care as needed, and the SECAs took them to class after that, just like they did in their old school. What happened 30 minutes later proved that assigning them to the top floor of the school was not a good idea. The fire alarm was activated so we could have a fire drill, and we needed to evacuate the building immediately. The special evacuation chairs we had just received that morning were still in their original boxes in the loading dock of the school. Once they were delivered to our floor, the adults were running around, bumping into each other, clumsily trying to open the boxes to find the proper-size chair for the handful of Diverse Learners who were still waiting to evacuate. The fire alarm continued to ring as loud as they usually do, and the noise scared some of the students, only adding to our urgency and stress. The minutes it took us to complete the fire drill felt like an eternity. We definitely learned our lesson, adjusted, and practiced regularly to exit in a safe and efficient way. We also completed all the other required safety drills within the next few days.



Our new group of Diverse Learners had all their classes in self-contained classrooms with specialized staff. Some science teachers would welcome them during fun demonstrations, and art teachers were also open to including them in projects, with the support of their dedicated SECAs. The general education students were curious and a little distant at first, but they were very accommodating and helpful in welcoming their new peers soon after they arrived.

I enjoyed this work immensely. I was fully engaged with every part of the transition and service delivery for this special group of Diverse Learners. The different stakeholders in the receiving high school were happy to know that these students were now in their neighborhood school. This was possible because the teachers and staff were so dedicated to ensuring their safety, continued learning, and wellbeing.

### **Yes, Any Child Can Learn**

A few years after managing the transition of the group of Diverse Learners into their neighborhood school and working at the district office monitoring compliance, I had the opportunity to join a team that was opening a brand-new high school in a different part of the city. The school served a large population of Latinx students. Overseeing the case manager in charge of the program for Diverse Learners with multiple disabilities was part of my work as the assistant principal.

There were many details that needed attention to be ready for the first day of school, including staffing and adapting bathroom spaces to ensure American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance. I had learned many useful lessons from my previous experience at the first high school and remembered to make use of them. Having the opportunity to explore inclusive practices as the schedules and programs were just developing opened new windows of possibility.

It was in one of the two classrooms dedicated to this program where I met Mr. Pratt. He was relentless and deeply believed in his students' ability to learn. His persistence made him accomplish things that not many people would believe possible. For example, he taught his nonverbal students how to enunciate a few important words that they were never before able to say, such as *mom, yes, no, more, now, please, and thank you*. He also encouraged and guided the CWAs to toilet-train some of the Diverse Learners who were 15 or 16 years old and still needed to wear diapers due to their physical challenges.

I remember going to his classroom and seeing him engage his students with different types of assistive technology while enthusiastically teaching math, reading, and science at a level they could grasp. During a brief conversation we recently had to reminisce about

the two years we worked together at the high school, he shared that he has a practice of observing his students carefully as he delivers instruction and immediately adjusts his lessons to keep them learning. He also ensures the content is rich and engaging because he is convinced his students know and understand much more than they might be able to express, which is why he provides them with a variety of options to demonstrate learning. The passion, thoughtful planning, contagious joy, and high regard for the youth entrusted to him were literally life changing. Those high-needs Diverse Learners experienced the well-being, learning, and overall growth they did because of Mr. Pratt's staunch conviction that every child *can* learn.

## **A NEW ERA: THE WAY WE NOW KNOW HOW TO BE**

The most transformative experience I had as an educator took place at the elementary school where I led an inclusion revolution (Rockey Moore, 2014) as a school principal. Soon after the school year began, I was called to a mandatory meeting where school administrators from all over our large Midwestern school district gathered to receive information about the Focused Monitoring designation the State Board of Education granted us. We received a folder with our school's special education data as we arrived. We listened to their presentation and took copious notes. The atmosphere of the meeting was not a friendly one. We were there because our schools had a pattern of placing special education students in settings that seemed overly restrictive. The message was clear: we were out of compliance and had to remediate that.

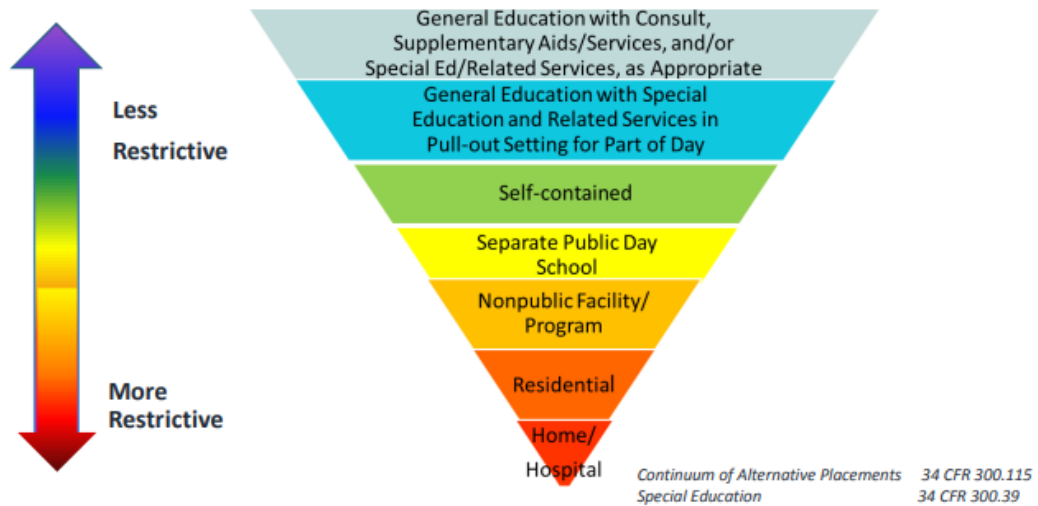
### **The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

Figure 3 lists the continuum of special education placement options, or LREs. The general education classroom with consultation and related services is at the top of the inverted pyramid. This is where inclusion falls. Once a student is placed outside the general education classroom, the level of restriction increases. Pull-out (resource) was the placement most commonly used at the school where I started my special education teaching career in the early '80's and at Mounts Elementary, where we received the Focused Monitoring designation by the State Board of Education. In self-contained or instructional placement, Diverse Learners are moved into a separate special education classroom for one or more core classes (math, reading, science, and social science).

Although the Diverse Learners who transferred from the ramp school to the neighborhood high school were placed in the most restrictive setting within our school, their LRE became less restrictive when they left their separate school. The other four levels

in the Continuum of Alternative Placements chart indicate restriction levels outside the general education classroom, which are beyond the scope of this project.

**Figure 3**  
*Continuum of Alternative Placements*



*Note.* This is an illustration of the alternative placement continuum as seen in Illinois State Board of Education (January 2019) Non-Regulatory Guidance Part 401, nonpublic special education facilities under section 12-7.02 of the school code.

### **One More Important Priority**

There were many aspects of the school’s remediation process I needed to tackle when I accepted the principal job at Mounts Elementary. The school was ranked at the lowest level of academic performance. According to a perception data metric, the school’s culture and climate were also in immediate need of attention. However, intentionally transforming the mindset and, subsequently, the practices surrounding our special education program also claimed a spot at the top of the priority list. The task was clear: our cookie-cutter IEPs were just not cutting it, and we had to address the individual needs of our Diverse Learners in the appropriate learning environment. This was not new to any of us. We learned this in our teacher preparation programs, but we became complacent and out of compliance. The goal was always to write IEPs that fit the students’ learning needs, not the staff’s schedules as we used to do at the school where I started my teaching career. Then why do we continue to promote exclusion through the placement of Diverse Learners in separate resource classrooms? I believe the main reason is lack of understanding of the impact segregation has on these students and the lack of proper

training on inclusive practices for teachers and school administrators. Continuing these practices poses a serious issue of inequity. Schools can enroll more Diverse Learners in resource classrooms, and this might appeal as efficient. Inclusion minutes can be difficult to schedule and require creativity and perseverance, and yes, it might require that a school secures additional special education teachers and SECAs. This is why states and school districts allocate funds for these programs. It's the law.

### **There Is Another Way: Inclusive, Equitable Practices for Diverse Learners**

The special education district representative assigned to our school noticed our determination to shed the outdated, exclusionary practices that qualified us for remediation with the State Board of Education. He recommended us to a foundation that invested time and resources to support a selected group of schools to become more inclusive. The Inclusion Foundation team scheduled an initial meeting with us to determine whether our needs and disposition aligned with their philosophy and approach to equitable practices. They asked questions and listened attentively to our answers, hoping to get to our *why*. We desperately needed this partnership, and they were looking to support committed, unwavering principals to set the tone and lead the way out of schooling segregation and exclusionary practices. They had supported a few other schools through their transformative inclusion journeys, and they knew that this open-mindedness was indispensable for a successful implementation.

I was elated when our acceptance into the Inclusion Foundation was announced. I felt deeply grateful that they saw potential in me as a leader to spearhead this important work. The first phase of our inclusion journey began with a presentation I made to the staff and parents to convey the rationale and logistics of partnering with the Inclusion Foundation. I firmly transmitted the compelling need we had to instill inclusive practices throughout our school, and I made my ethical stance on inclusion transparent. And so, our own inclusion revolution began. We posted signs all over the school to remind ourselves of our commitment (see Figure 4).

#### **Figure 4**

*Inclusion Revolution* (Rockey Moore Cummings, 2014)

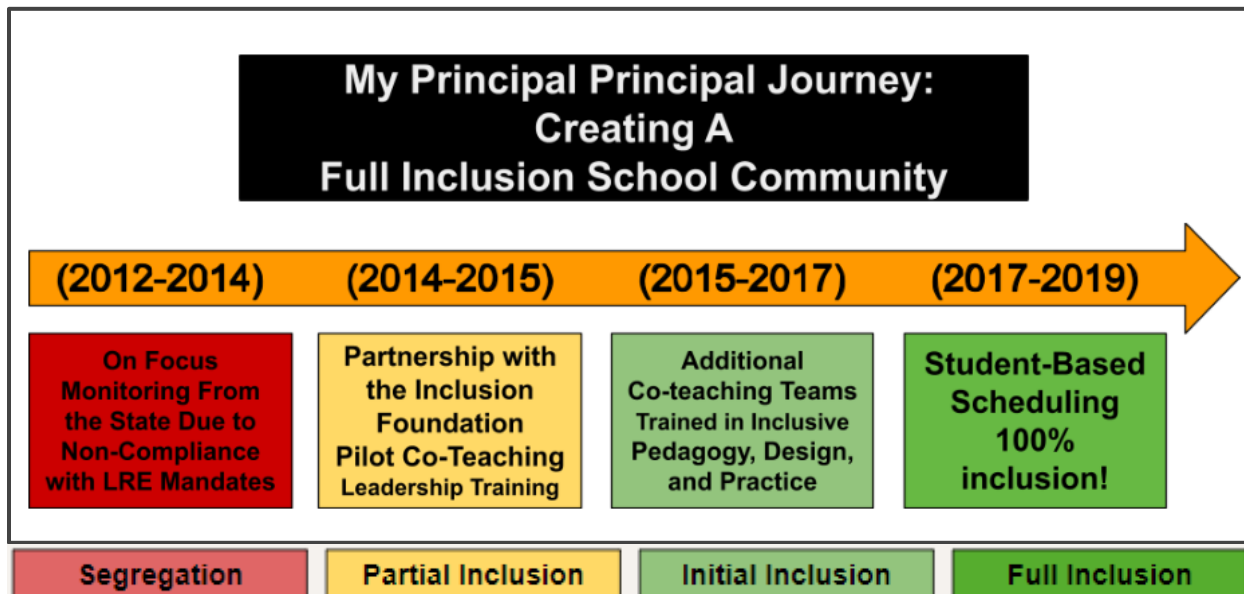


*Note.* Stickers with this logo went all over the school to show the community's support for our inclusion initiatives. Having LOVE highlighted in the word REVOLUTION made the message more significant.




The parents had a few questions related to the quantity and quality of services provided to students with disabilities in the general education classroom. They wanted to ensure the services were robust and sufficient to meet the needs of their Diverse Learners. Other parents wanted to ensure that the general education students' opportunities would not be compromised by having their teacher spend too much time on the students with IEPs. We made a commitment as a school to ensure that *all* students received proper services and attention. Some teachers seemed very enthusiastic; others had no opinion and wanted to wait and see how the inclusion initiative would work. A small group of special education teachers was reluctant to join the inclusion revolution, and I knew why. As a converted special education teacher who used to ascribe to the separate-setting philosophy, I could see why they felt the need to "advocate" for their Diverse Learners. They believed that they should pull them from their natural learning environment with their nondisabled peers to receive the services they needed to remediate their basic skills gaps in their resource classroom. Like them, I knew I could make the Diverse Learners feel loved, safe, and comfortable in the corner of my shared resource classroom, where we negotiated the going rate of stickers per minute of rote learning.

**Figure 5**  
*The Inclusion Revolution Trajectory*



During our inclusion revolution, the school administration joined the co-teaching teams formed by the special and general education teachers spearheading the work. We learned from Inclusion Foundation together over nine full-day sessions spread throughout the school year. The foundation knew the importance of having initiatives led by school administrators and early adopter practitioners to plow through the internal and external




obstacles and barriers of change. During these professional learning sessions, we were exposed to compelling research on the academic and social-emotional benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities and their school communities. School team reflection, discussion, cross-pollination with other schools' work, and activities designed for immediate classroom application were provided during each session.

Each year we selected a new team of teachers to attend the Inclusion Foundation sessions until close to 98% of the teaching staff was trained in inclusive practices. Participants always looked forward to these professional learning days. The presenters, who were well-known inclusion experts and authors, shared their experiences with us. We had access to their books and materials. At times, the hilarious renditions of their most awkward growing pains would have us all laughing uncontrollably. Rubber chickens and other amusing prizes would create an uproar as they flew through the air on their way to the winning recipients. Attendees also appreciated the attention to detail and the meticulous planning of each session, which included delicious food presented with care. We would refer to the Inclusion Foundation sessions as spa days for the brain and soul. To say that the sessions were engaging and transformative is an understatement.

We were also assigned a coach to walk us through the implementation phases of the inclusion journey. The inclusion coach complemented the robust professional learning we acquired during the monthly Inclusion Foundation sessions and provided our co-teaching teams with further job-embedded guidance. They often engaged the teams in co-planning standards-based lessons that targeted the needs of all learners without excluding them from their natural learning community. They also observed co-taught lessons and provided high-quality, actionable feedback.

The Inclusion Foundation gifted us with professional learning, reading materials, continuous planning support, live coaching, consultation, and networking socials with other inclusion school leaders without asking for anything in return. There was no charge for any of their support and services. There was no expiration date to their partnership, which allowed us to organically grow and evolve our own inclusion brand at our own pace. We knew they would be there to support us with special cases if needed. In turn, we offered our appreciation and charged ahead with a genuine willingness to maximize the results of our efforts to understand, embrace, and promote inclusive practices in our school.

The professional learning and coaching components of our partnership with the Inclusion Foundation complemented each other perfectly. I believe this is the reason why, after six years of continuous focus, our initiative successfully culminated in our Diverse Learners receiving services in the general education or natural learning environment. We achieved



100% special education inclusion at our school. Showing our inclusive classrooms to interested visitors from other schools filled my heart with pride and gratitude to the Inclusion Foundation and the brave teachers who led and continuously reinvented themselves as educators to include and serve all their students in their inclusive learning communities.

A superficial way to mechanically manipulate our numbers to remove us from the Focused Monitoring State Board of Education list was out of the question. For the change to be meaningful, it needed to be deep, genuine, and sustainable. Like many educators, we assumed at the start that we knew what inclusion was all about, but the reality of its implementation, when done with fidelity, required a multiyear process along a twisted road of trial and error, reflection, scheduled creativity, and deep, intentional learning and improvement. The Inclusion Foundation radically transformed the way we served our Diverse Learners. They also permanently changed the way I see and approach inclusion in special education. It is the answer to access and equity.

## **Isaiah**

Of the hundreds of students who benefited from the support we received through The Inclusion Foundation, Isaiah is one of the most memorable. Like clockwork, Isaiah would start crying and screaming in the hallway outside his kindergarten door at 9:00 am. For the first three months during that school year, I would run to the scene as fast as I could to calm him down and persuade him to go upstairs with his special education teacher to receive the minutes his IEP required. I would resort to my old resource teacher tricks: offering him stickers and promising free time on the computer if he went upstairs. This never worked with him. His meltdowns could last up to 30 minutes, and they were very loud and quite difficult to bear. One day, a substitute food service staff member who did not know the child said to me, "Ms. Principal, that poor child needs to be in a separate school where they can help him!"

Isaiah had already been through a couple of rough years during his short schooling life. His teachers, mom, and I collaborated incessantly to adjust what we were doing to help him. There were days when his schedule had to be adjusted, times when his mother was available to come to the school to give us a hand, and moments when she would take him home to rest.

Through the Inclusion Foundation trainings, the general and the special education teachers became progressively more effective at supporting Isaiah in the general education classroom, and this minimized his meltdowns significantly. The teachers made a great team and constantly collaborated to adjust their lessons and create tools to help

Isaiah navigate the day. They also stayed in constant communication with his mother. They worked hard, but they also expected a lot from him and held him accountable for his participation, especially when it came to self-management. Isaiah not only met but exceeded all our expectations.

By third grade, the year when I transitioned to another school, Isaiah was receiving all his instruction in the general education classroom with his nondisabled peers. He was also one of the top readers in his class. The deeply emotional episodes were now far and few between, and his ability to self-regulate was strengthening and very impressive. He learned to self-monitor and signal the teacher with something like “Oh, man. It’s coming!” A supporting adult would provide him with options. Isaiah would either step out to take a walk and talk in the hallway. There were times when he preferred to be silent or go to an empty classroom to sit and catch his breath. His peers who had been with him since preschool would encourage him with “You got this!” or “See you in a little bit.” Isaiah might cry for a few minutes and talk to himself out loud about what he was feeling in order to self-soothe and self-regulate. He had social work services weekly. Math and writing were still areas of struggle, and support was provided during those periods. In a recent get together with one of his teachers, she shared that Isaiah is doing well. He is in sixth grade now.

Without the training, support, and coaching we received from the Inclusion Foundation, and without the team members opening their minds and hearts to the possibility of becoming the school community Isaiah needed, he would probably have been placed in a separate school without his peers, without the teachers who loved and cared for him, and without the school community that embraced him unconditionally and watched him grow and overcome so many obstacles. Isaiah inspired his peers, his teachers, his family, and our administrative team to learn and improve our practice. I learned to see special education and inclusion through an equitable lens while transforming my leadership approach because of him. Isaiah is also the inspiration for this capstone project.

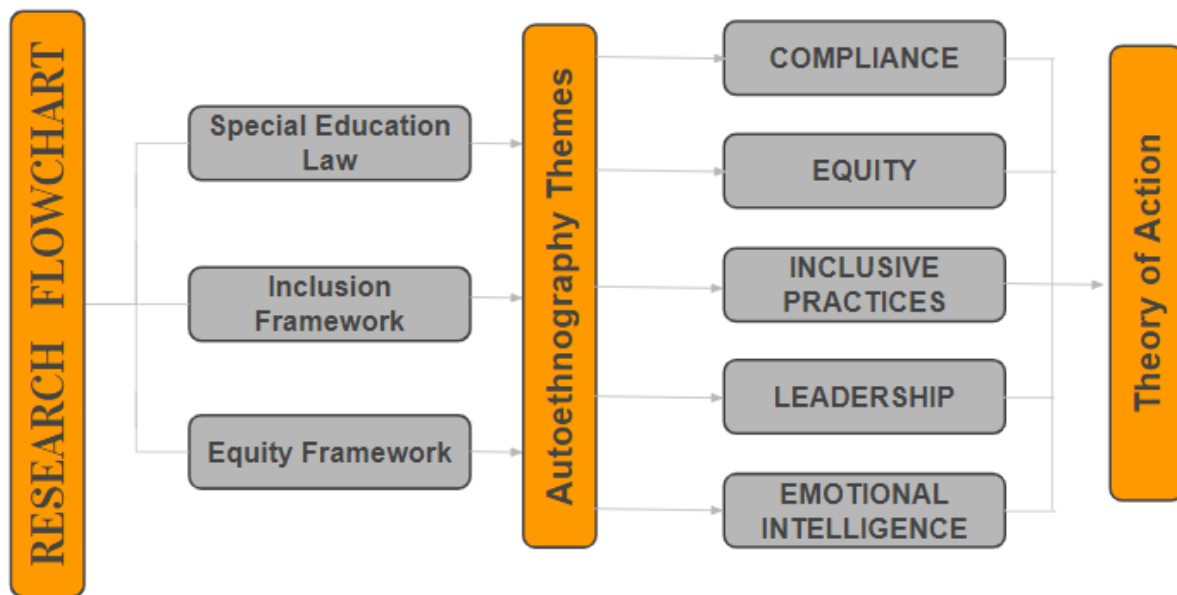
## **PASSING IT ON: SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS ON THEIR INCLUSION JOURNEYS**

The fourth and last cluster of the autoethnographic narrative marks the conclusion of my Segregation-to-Inclusive-Practice reflectivity journey. The project’s emergent Theory of Action offers five equity and inclusion foundational pillars to district staff, who, like me, are entrusted with principal leadership development. The hope is that localized trajectories can be co-designed with school principals who are embarking on their own inclusion journeys.

## EMERGENT THEMES

An important aspect of autoethnography is the way in which data is collected. The data of the research comes from exploring an individual's unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions (Custer, 2014). During data collection and analysis, I identified five recurring themes that arose consistently throughout my narrative. I was mindful of special education law, inclusion framework and equity framework while identifying the themes, and concluded that the five most crucial components in any successful special education environment are compliance, equity, inclusive practices, leadership, and emotional intelligence.

**Figure 6**  
*Research Flowchart*



These themes supported the tenets that emerged from the analysis of the ethnographic data. When principals receive the proper support, they can develop the dispositions and competencies needed to cultivate equitable, inclusive school communities. It is critical that principals are supported in a nurturing way while they develop vital leadership skills. These two forms of support are the key first steps to making a difference in schools. When principles are being supported properly, they have the means and ability to support and provide for their school communities properly, and that means all students benefit.



**Figure 7**

*Tenets from Emergent Themes*

Supporting and providing services to Diverse Learners in inclusive settings with their nondisabled peers has optimal socioemotional and academic benefits for all students.

Principal support must include nurturing the school leader while developing their leadership competencies.

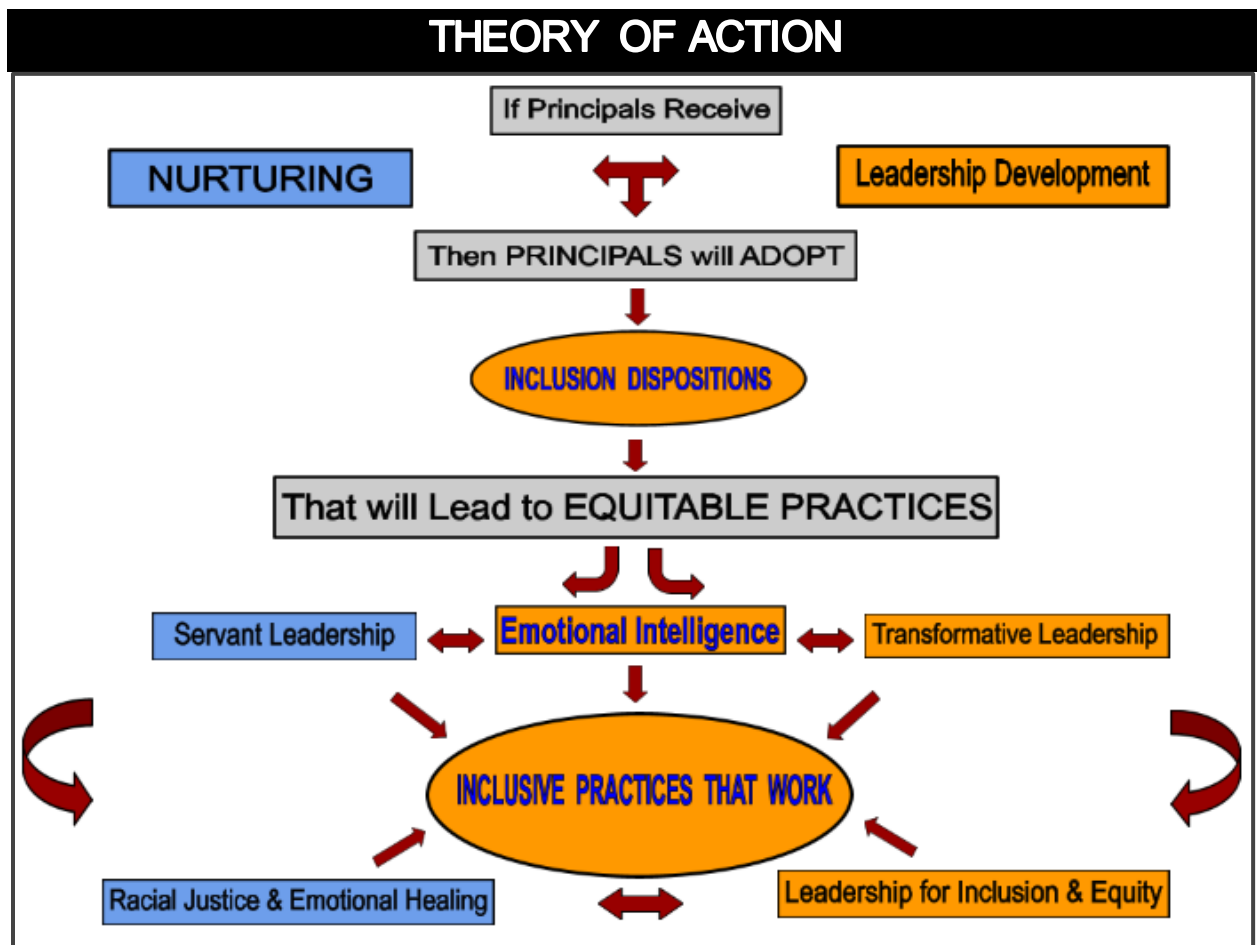
Principals who receive the proper support develop the dispositions and competencies needed to cultivate equitable, inclusive school communities.

## APPLICATION


### A THEORY OF ACTION

This theory of action aims to explore ways in which district staff who oversee and support principals can create a leadership development plan to promote equitable, inclusive practices in their schools. Through the data collection and analysis, I identified key values and principles that act as the pillars that support inclusive practices.

**Figure 8**  
*Theory of Action*



The basic premise is that by nurturing and encouraging principals to improve their leadership competency, they will be more likely adopt inclusion dispositions or the willingness and capacity to cultivate inclusive school communities. This will ultimately lead to more equitable practices for Diverse Learners and other students with unmet needs.



Thanks to my professional lived experience over three decades as an educator, and through the support and work with the Inclusion Foundation, I have realized that the journey to inclusion is far from impossible. Figure 8 is a flow chart showing the main components needed to ensure all stakeholders within a school system are treated equitably and supported while transforming schools to be more inclusive. To encourage and enable this work, district offices and other institutions should provide principals with the tools to become better leaders. Developing leadership competency is a skill that requires conscious effort, however, when we prioritize leadership development in principals, those skills eventually get passed on to teachers, and from there, passed on to students. Leaders create leaders, and the ultimate goal of this theory of action is to provide a blueprint for how to create longstanding and sustainable change in our school systems by providing adaptive and progressive leadership skills to principals.

Two parallel domains are proposed to equip school principals to successfully establish inclusive practices that work. One of them is through adult nurturing or socioemotional support provided by the staff in charge of improving the leadership capacity of the principal. This domain is represented in blue to the left of the Theory of Action chart and it reflects the internal qualities of a servant leader. The other domain is equity-focused leadership and it refers to transformative leadership which seeks to eradicate external societal practices that condone and promote segregation in schools. The reason why the two domains are color-coded and placed in two different sides of the of the theory of action chart is because they represent two different but important parts of a whole that merge through emotional intelligence in the center.


If principals receive nurturing and leadership development, then principals will adopt inclusion depositions that will lead to equitable practices. Equitable practices depend on servant leadership, transformative leadership, racial justice and emotional healing, inclusive and equitable leadership, and emotional intelligence—the common component among the other four that truly helps to create inclusive practices that work.

## **THE PILLARS THAT SUPPORT INCLUSIVE PRACTICES THAT WORK**

### **Servant and Transformational Leadership**

Servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach that empowers leaders to grow on the basis of altruism and ethics (Eva et al., 2019). As the name implies, servant leadership requires a prioritization of servitude. Servant leaders focus on the needs of the people they serve, not their own aspirations as leaders or even the goals of the organization (Crippen & Willows 2019). Servant leadership also emphasizes the importance of being





authentic and true in one's interaction with others. As members of service-based institutions, principals and teachers should be driven by the will to serve (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership, however, is a double-edged sword, as it is easy to confuse service with a full disregard for one's personal needs. This is a common challenge among teachers in institutions that require servant leadership. Such teachers often feel that their service to their students is more important than the regulation of their own stress and anxiety. School leaders should be aware that demanding servant leadership of teachers who already perform high-demanding duties could increase their levels of stress (Wu et al., 2020).

Transformative leadership theory "begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others" (Shields et al., 2020, p. 4). Therefore, transformative leadership is similar to servant leadership in that it also prioritizes the needs of the people they serve rather than the goals of the leader. However, transformative leadership centers on undertaking a complete and pervasive transformation of an entire social system (Shields et al., 2020, p. 5). This makes the transformative leadership approach sustainable and long standing, capable of tackling problems in any time or generation, so long as school leaders continue to value just and fair practices. In general, it is essential that leaders know themselves, their organizations, and their communities. Their knowledge frameworks must change to ensure equity, and power must be redistributed to balance inequities. Their pedagogy must emphasize democracy, equity, and justice. Leaders must critique norms and exhibit moral courage for the collective good. The value of the transformative leader is not based on their certain knowledge or experience, but rather on their mental models. This leadership strategy can involve providing powerful counter-narratives to traditional knowledges in educational leadership in order to transform the educational system toward justice and equity (Agosto & Roland, 2018).

According to De Klerk & Smith (2021), a positive outcome of transformative leadership is the trickle effect it has on school communities as educators develop a sense of agency through trust and ongoing collaboration with their school leaders. Through these interactions, teachers become like principals in that they are inspired to taking on leadership roles as the need arises. This type of leadership is emancipatory for teachers as it encourages them to see the value in growth toward leadership, and that in turn makes the process of inclusive transformation in schools much easier. Teachers and principals should be encouraged to be more inventive, consistent and practical in ethical decision-making (De Klerk & Smith, 2021). This aligns with the process in which school leaders can involve teachers in the transformation school communities need to undergo to become the inclusive, equitable Diverse Learners need and deserve.

## **Racial Justice and Emotional Healing**


A main factor in the overrepresentation of minority students is the implicit bias of whoever is conducting their assessment. The assessment of disabilities often depends on the person who is defining, searching, and assessing the individual. Because teachers usually conduct the preliminary referral, their feelings, expectations, attitudes, and beliefs are significant in the referral process (Jobe 2018). This can lead to inappropriate referrals, which often result in special education placement. One study found that “students who come from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES) may be at risk for placement in special education not based on the student's individual factors, but based upon the teacher's sense of self-efficacy” (Jobe 2018). Teachers and other school leaders are morally and ethically obligated to refrain from operating with bias and prejudice. However, some educational professionals might not even be aware that implicit bias actively influences their decision-making.

Nonengagement with racial problems allows the structures of racism that pervade the United States and its school systems to remain unquestioned and in place, which Connor (2019) refers to as “benign neglect.” Nurturing school leaders, teachers, and students is important in racial justice and emotional healing as a fundamental aspect of creating change. The overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in special education indicates the need for educators to remain aware of racial biases and the racial history that may affect a child’s ability to learn or access appropriate education. It is important for school leaders to acknowledge the pain of oppression while fostering hope for justice. Pour-Khorshid (2018) found that simply allowing students to share stories that relate to their racial identity in a safe environment allows for collective support and a greater understanding of the impact of race on students and teachers alike.

To support minority students or teachers of color, school leaders should enable the healing of racial and emotional traumas. Healing, not coping, should be the priority, as healing moves beyond simply surviving within an oppressive system or society toward thriving in it (French et al., 2020).

## **Leadership for Inclusion and Equity**

According to Carter and Abawi (2018), for a school to be truly inclusive, inclusion must be a way of thinking—a philosophy of how educators remove barriers to learning and value all members of a school community. The authors suggest that to remove barriers to education and deliver high-quality outcomes, schools require inclusive practices that embrace all students as equally valuable affiliates of the school community. It is



important to choose leaders based on their competency, communication skills, and passion for inclusion. These qualities are what the current literature (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019, Pour-Khorshid, 2018, French et al., 2020) describes as social justice leadership, a preparedness of leaders to follow their moral compass through instigating and facilitating moral dialogue.

Through the facilitation of guided discussion, students can cultivate genuine curiosity and empathy toward people of different backgrounds. This is known as learning orientation, the will to use interactions with someone from a different background as a means to learn new things. Sumner (2018) showed that students with high scores on the learning orientation measure were more likely to endorse diversity and inclusion. Educators should not shy away from engaging students from different backgrounds in intentional, well-thought-out interactions. As students, teachers, or principals strive for integration and inclusion, it is important to emphasize the role of a shared identity within the school (Sumner 2018). This emphasis should not be confused with an attempt to obscure differences between people. On the contrary, it is acknowledging that everyone belongs to multiple groups (racial, ethnic, gender, ability) while also simultaneously sharing membership in at least one social group (Sumner, 2018).

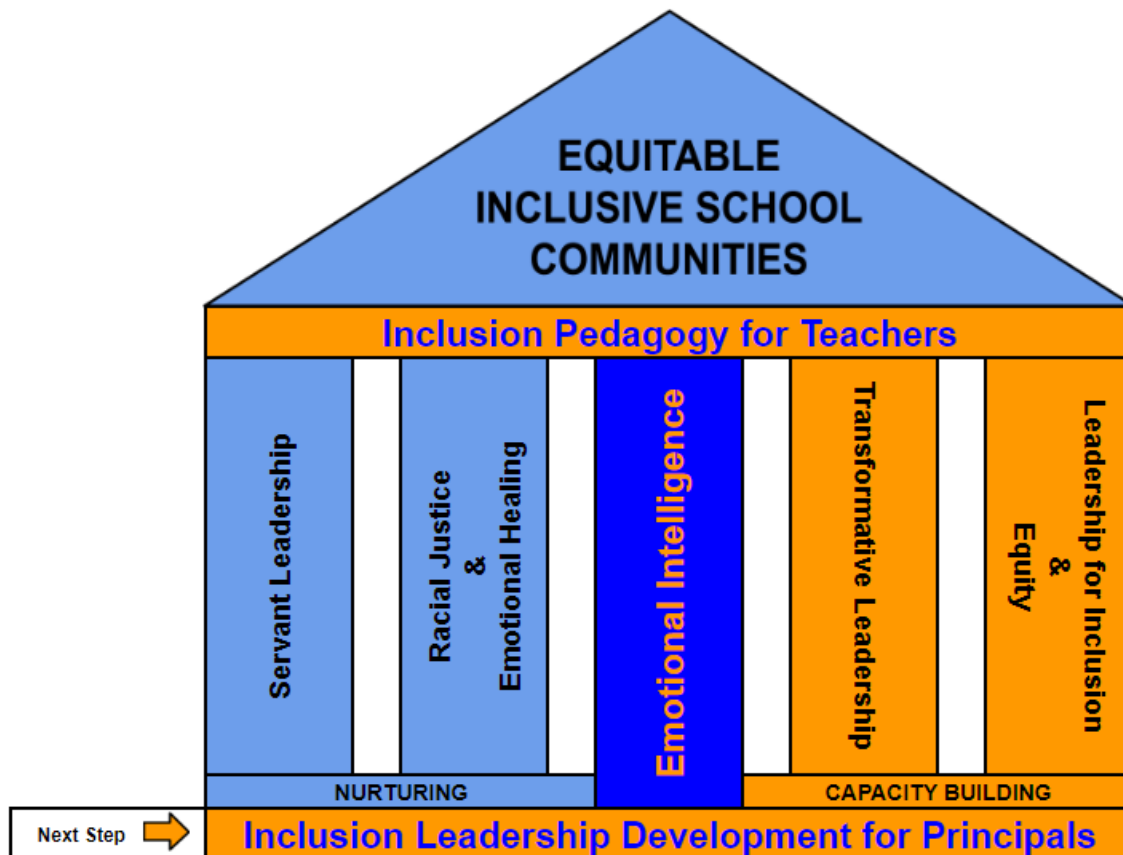
### **Emotional Intelligence**

The ability to express and control emotions is essential, but so is the ability to understand, interpret, and respond to the emotions of others. Current research suggests that there is an increasing need for leaders to understand, recognize, and manage emotions. Issah (2018) explains that leaders who have developed emotional intelligence use their moods and emotions, and those of others, to motivate the people they serve to adapt desired behaviors. Emotionally intelligent leaders show care, respect, and fairness; adopt face-to-face communication; and make jobs meaningful and worthwhile for those who follow them—which in turn cultivates loyalty to the organization (Issah 2018). The Trait Meta-Mood Scale is one of the most commonly used tests to measure emotional intelligence and defines the three dimensions of emotional intelligence as “Emotional Attention (the attention that an individual pays to his/her emotions), Emotional Understanding (the ability to understand, identify, and label his/her affective states), and Emotional Repair (the ability to regulate emotions)” (Martínez-Monteaquedo, 2019). The study found that individuals with high emotional intelligence (or rather, a high capacity to understand the emotions of others, understand the possible causes and consequences of those emotions, and regulate those emotional states) are more effective when faced with stressful situations and less vulnerable to their negative consequences (Martínez-Monteaquedo, 2019). There are three reasons why all teachers should have emotional competence, first being that it elevates their own personal well-being, second being that it increases

effectiveness and quality of their teaching processes, and the third being that a leader’s emotional regulation serves as a model for emotional development among students (Martínez-Montegudo, 2019). District staff who support the leadership development of principals should emphasize the role of teacher and school leader emotions and promote training in emotional regulation.

A review by Gomez-Leal et al. (2022) explained that emotional intelligence skills are not the only essential development areas for school leadership, however their importance has recently been recognized as a key component in the execution of plans and the fulfillment of responsibilities of school leaders. This review provides evidence of how emotional intelligence skills and behavioral competencies lead to more effective school leadership. Self-awareness, self-management, and empathy were other skills that were seen in those who exhibited strong leadership abilities (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022).

**Figure 9**  
*Proposed Next Steps*



## Limitations

Autoethnography is controversial and has been heavily criticized for being subjective and lacking the validity, reliability, and generalizability of traditional quantitative methods (Delamont, 2007). Furthermore, it has also been referred to as “self-indulgent, navel-gazing introspection and highly individualized” (Holt, 2003).



Although the project champions inclusion as an optimal placement for Diverse Learners, this is a limitation. There are many other programs for which these children and youth qualify that fall into more restrictive placements that are appropriate and highly effective to meet their needs. The reality is that there are Diverse Learners who require more-restrictive, intense, and restrictive settings than others. This does not nullify the possibility of their participation in the general education classroom to the maximum extent possible.

It is also important to note, that as the narrative illustrated, transforming school communities requires complex training, planning, reorganization and paradigm shifts that may take years to properly implement. These multiyear processes require a flexible, committed principal to lead change and manage resistance. There is no guarantee that each school will be equipped with such a principal. Schools trying to implement inclusion practices will require—in addition to a competent leader—specialized staff training and support from experts in the field, which is not yet readily available.

## CONCLUSION

The autoethnographic narrative shared in this capstone project offered a glance at the intersections that I, as the researcher, had with the world of special education in different roles during three decades of service as a K–12 educator. The qualitative research methodology I used allowed me entry into academic discourse that until recently has been largely inaccessible to immigrant women of color whose first language is not English. This reflexive undertaking uncovered a trajectory from practices that promoted the segregation of Diverse Learners to a shift in mindset and application that champions inclusive practices. The five themes that emerged from the data analysis became the inspiration for the theory of action proposed in the capstone.

The project highlighted a partnership with the Inclusion Foundation, which promoted the access and equitable practices Diverse Learners in my school urgently needed. As a principal, I received the same strategies and pedagogy provided to the school’s educators during their training. The nurturing, coaching, and consultative support the Inclusion Foundation provided for me as a principal were immensely appreciated and helpful.



Transforming a school community into an equitable and inclusive environment for Diverse Learners is a complex task that does not happen without the principal's buy-in and commitment to a multiyear process. Thus, the proposed next step, as Figure 9 illustrates, is to create an inclusion leadership development plan that nurtures and supports school leaders interested in creating their own inclusion revolutions. The two sets of pillars represent the equal importance of nurturing not only school leaders propelling the transformation of their schools, but to the Black and Brown Diverse Learners who are overly represented in special education programs as a product of systemic and institutionalized marginalization and racism.

### **Francisco, Shorty, or Isaiah: We Have a Choice**


These three young men were labeled with disabilities at such a young age that it was more than likely that they would never be able to escape the pattern of falling further and further behind academically. In most schools, it's nearly impossible for a student to be reassigned to a general education classroom once they've been placed in special education. For Francisco, Shorty, and Isaiah, segregation was a key component in their deficits throughout their academic careers, even though it is impossible to replicate the academic richness of a general education classroom. Students who are segregated and placed in resource classrooms are missing out on fundamental social interaction. Francisco and Shorty's stories are sad but not uncommon. So many Black and Latinx boys end up on the streets or in prisons because of recommendations in their early childhood years that did not turn out beneficial. Isaiah is proof that when there is a will, there is a way. Isaiah is one of hundreds of students whose needs seemed too demanding for their school to handle, but we proved that with the necessary support, teachers and entire school communities can ensure that every child learns and feels like they belong.



### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

In truth, the goal for all educators and school leaders should always be to implement any strategy that would bridge the gap for students whose needs are not being met. Change is understandably intimidating, but it is necessary for progress to be made. By cultivating strong leadership among principals, a chain reaction will occur that will inevitably enable everyone to adopt the competency to enact change in whatever space they might occupy.

There is no doubt that the needs of Diverse Learners have been at the forefront of many educators' minds at one point or another, and there is no doubt that these professionals



have tried to some degree to find solutions for them. However, they often find themselves applying methodologies that have already failed countless children. To fulfill our responsibility as educators to provide truly equitable education, we must be prepared to continue changing and adopting not only our policies but our beliefs and expectations. The beauty of developing leadership abilities is that it benefits both the person developing the skills and the lives they touch. Our schools need strong leaders, and our leaders need strong support systems. It is crucial for district offices and other institutions that support principals to provide the support and competency development that will empower principals to cultivate inclusive and equitable school communities.

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