

Moving Toward Inclusion: Inclusion Coaches' Reflections and Discussions in Supporting Educators in Practice

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Abstract

When school systems and administrations provide educators with opportunities to engage in transformative learning through reflective practice and provide opportunities to challenge their beliefs, educator pedagogy for inclusive education can be enhanced (Evans, 1997; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Richardson, 1998). Our research examined the experiences of 11 inclusion coaches while they provided support and built capacity for 38 educators during a change in special education service delivery, seeking insight into the effectiveness of this coaching model. Coaches' experiences were shared during semi-focused group discussions and via an online blog. Qualitative analysis revealed coaches' roles in this context were influenced by their personal expectations, personal growth, support for one another, and support for respective educators. The findings from this research are pivotal for pedagogy and teaching philosophy in inclusion.

In recent years, ministry and school board policies have stimulated the implementation of inclusive practice in schools across the province of Ontario, Canada. Adding personnel support with expertise in special education is one strategy currently used to facilitate change in traditional educational programs for students with disabilities, i.e., shifting from segregated special education classrooms to fully inclusive schools (where all students are educated in grade-appropriate classrooms in neighbourhood schools). This particular support model is consistent with Transformative Learning Theory (Cranton, 2007), as it enables educators to reflect on previous knowledge and experience through an inquiry-based approach, using collaborative problem solving to implement best

inclusive practices. The current paper examines the experiences of Ontario inclusion coaches during their process of school-board-wide change toward inclusion and highlights the variables that supported and challenged their experiences.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Background

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) describes inclusive education as a way of acknowledging the diverse needs of all students and of providing programming that allows full participation in the education system and community. The document indicates that for inclusive education to occur, curriculum, teaching approaches, and strategies need to change. This involves changes in content, approaches, structures, and strategies for all children (UNESCO, 1994). It is on this premise that over the past 20 years many ministries and departments of education around the world have been developing policies to adopt the idea of inclusive education. School boards have since developed inclusive policies and continue to work toward implementing inclusive practices that meet the needs of all learners by ensuring their participation in the classroom and in the school (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1994; Reiser & Secretariat, 2012).

Porter (2010) noted that inclusive schools provide support both to students with disabilities and to educators in order to accomplish individual goals that are meaningful. Educators and administrators understand that inclusion is about how environments can be created to ensure the success of all students regardless of their ability (Porter, 2010). Adopting strategies including Differentiated Instruction (developing lessons and activities based on the needs of the students in the class) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL; i.e., strategies that are intended for some, but which benefit all) are increasingly important for classes to be inclusive (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Roush, 2008). Implementing practices that are fully inclusive has a significant impact on the classroom teacher's role in terms of daily workload (e.g., increase in workload) and classroom practice (e.g., adjusting teaching styles) in order to meet the diversity of abilities in the classroom (Forlin, 2001; Reiser & Secretariat, 2012). Research on implementing inclusive practices indicates that in order for educators to be effective and ensure each student is successful, ongoing professional development and support is needed from administration and from experts in the field (Bennett, 2009; Forlin, 2001; Porter, 2010; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995).

Transformative Learning Theory can be used to inform how professional development, knowledge uptake, and capacity building can happen in the context of collaborative peer coaching. Transformative Learning Theory suggests individuals create new meaning for existing schemas through questioning and evaluating personal experiences on an issue, and through confirming one's knowledge through interactions with others (Bass, 2012; Cranton, 2007). Transformation in thinking, beliefs, and practice is a process and often requires a reflective component. In Carrington and Selva (2010) reflective practice in conjunction with service-learning pedagogy demonstrated transformative learning in pre-service educators' perceptions of inclusive education, in which educators were able to reflect on and reconsider personal assumptions influencing practice and to change future pedagogy accordingly. Brigham (2011) studied the reflective responses of 24 immigrant educators (from 17 different countries) new to

Canada who met in small groups on a regular basis to reflect and discuss issues surrounding immigration challenges and teaching. Results indicated that the educators identified a collective social transformation because of their involvement in the group. Brigham's study demonstrated that through collegial support, cognitive and affective domains were important for the transformative learning process.

Although Transformative Learning Theory may not be explicit in the inclusion literature, the theory emanates through the professional development and support that inclusion coaches offer educators. More than a decade of research on the use of peer coaching or elbow partners in schools has demonstrated that working with colleagues to improve practice has been effective (Buly, Coskie, Robinson, & Egawa 2006; Swafford, 1998; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Coaches provide educators with procedural, affective, and reflective support which broadly involves: answering questions, highlighting educators' strengths, suggesting alternative strategies, facilitating problem solving, encouraging risk taking, assisting during implementation challenges, and encouraging reflective practice (Buly et al., 2006; Swafford, 1998; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). Furthermore, educators indicated that the support that coaches provided affected the teacher change process and promoted self-reflection (Buly et al., 2006; Swafford, 1998; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010).

A more recent trend in coaching literature involves the role of experts or other professionals in the school system to support educators working with students who have exceptionalities (Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape, & Norwich, 2012; Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery 2010; Sharma et al., 2010; Strieker, 2012). Independent of expertise (e.g., school psychologist; itinerant support teacher for the visually impaired [ISTV]; inclusion consultant), having a support person in the classroom for educators who were integrating a student with an exceptionality tends to yield positive outcomes (Boyle et al., 2012; Sharma et al. 2010; Strieker, 2012). Expert support and training plays a crucial role in educators' ability to meet the needs of students, particularly when regular collaboration takes place. Inclusive environments were facilitated when the support person developed an understanding of the educator's training needs and was able to provide support and training in a non-confrontational manner (Boyle et al., 2012; Scheeler et al., 2010). Further, Strieker (2012) found that the support that inclusion consultants provided (e.g., modelling, co-teaching, differentiated instruction, behaviour management, advising administrators about action plans) was important for creating inclusive schools.

Although having an expert support person has desirable outcomes, it is far from flawless. Research has reported that communication, time, and attitudinal barriers may pose challenges for the inclusion support person (Morris & Sharma, 2011). Morris and Sharma reported that school staff (including principals, classroom educators, and teacher assistants) felt restricted by time constraints that limited their ability to collaborate or to schedule programming meetings regarding specific students, and overall did not have a well-developed understanding of the support person's (ISTV's) role. Further, in that study, some educators believed that children with visual impairments would be better served in special schools. These beliefs contributed to non-inclusive pedagogical practices, poor communication, and negative attitude. Since coaching literature in the context of inclusion support is limited, ongoing research is needed regarding the

effectiveness of coaching for informing educators about inclusive practices for students with various exceptionalities.

In order for educators to create inclusive classroom environments, a change process must occur. The research on teacher change has suggested that several key factors are important for sustained change in pedagogy and practice (Carrington, 1999; Gibbs, 2007; Richardson, 1998). Educators must first demonstrate the desire to engage in change. If an educator deems change important and achievable, the likelihood of engaging in and making changes to pedagogy and practice is greater (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012; Richardson, 1998). Relevant and timely professional development, such as support from an expert or coach, is one way to promote new learning and risk taking (Strieker, 2012). Research has also suggested that in order to challenge and change attitudes and beliefs about inclusion, educators need the opportunity to actively engage in and experience success using inclusive practices in their classrooms (Evans, 1997). Evans further described that a teacher's readiness for change occurs when s/he can balance autonomy with community. Ideally, this is a community of practice (the school) where educators are encouraged to be inquirers and to engage with each other in critical discussions regarding pedagogy and practice (Berry, 2011; Evans, 1997; Gibbs 2007).

Engaging in a community of practice and collaborating with colleagues fosters the development of strategies and pedagogy for improving outcomes for students with exceptionalities. Personal reflection about expectations and practices, however, is also important for professional growth, effective teaching practices, and student learning (Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Shoniker, 2011). Educators who reflected on and collaborated with colleagues about classroom management, strategies, and routines reported experiencing a more trusting school atmosphere. These educators also advocated for the creation of policies that prescribe and encourage future collaboration (Postholm, 2008).

In the current context, Transformative Learning Theory highlights the meaning that coaches and educators ascribe to an ideal of what inclusive education looks like based on their experiences together in the classroom. A move toward inclusive education is not simply about creating frameworks and developing policies, rather about supporting schools and educators toward creating inclusive schools and classrooms that incorporate existing knowledge and experience through inquiry-based practice. Although coaching models are beneficial for facilitating and supporting educators working to create inclusive environments (e.g., Morris & Sharma, 2012), there is little research on the experiences of coaches as their role unfolds in a school system undergoing transition to inclusion. In the current research, classroom educators were provided with an inclusion coach to support a board-wide transition from a model of self-contained classrooms to a fully inclusive school board. A descriptive phenomenological approach and transformative learning lens has been used to explore this subset of the data, which is from a larger ongoing research project. Our study explored the coaching experiences of elbow partners and sought to identify factors that might contribute to, or pose barriers for, coaches in their role of supporting educators toward inclusive classroom practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions and experiences of 13 inclusion coaches as they worked through successes and challenges of supporting schools and teachers through a board-wide transition. The school board, experiencing a change in service delivery, had implemented the role of inclusion coaches to support educators in facilitating inclusive classrooms. Although limited, previous research indicated that the role of an itinerant or coach is unique in that the specialized support they can provide is extremely valuable, yet their ability to connect with classroom educators in an authentic way can pose great challenges (Morris & Sharma, 2011; Sharma et al., 2010). By examining the experiences of inclusion coaches during challenging and successful moments at the onset of their role, this research provides a glimpse into the process of breaking down barriers, changing teacher perceptions, and facilitating genuine inclusive classrooms through partnerships and capacity building.

Methods

Research Design

The study used a subset of qualitative data derived from a larger research study (Bennett et al., 2014) that examined the overall experiences and change process of teachers and coaches with regard to their perceptions, attitudes, and pedagogy. Qualitative research was conducted through online reflective responses (in which participants were asked to reflect on a series of questions and provide their perceptions based on experience over a period of time) and through focus group interviews with the inclusion coach participants. Because focus groups are useful for conducting initial research into an area of interest (Gerber & Smith, 2006), this method was combined with the online reflective response technique to capture a more complete representation of the inclusion coaches' perceptions and experiences. This article reports on the challenges and barriers experienced by the 13 inclusion coaches during the initial 8 weeks of their partnerships with educators who were novices to inclusion.

Online reflective responses and focus groups provided participants with a safe and non-threatening platform to express experiences in a detailed, open-ended fashion. Online reflective responses were completed anonymously and allowed the opportunity for coaches to share as much or as little as they were comfortable with. Further, three researchers joined the coaches for two focus groups at their school board, at a time when coaches were already gathered to debrief and share their experiences with one another. Through these online reflective responses and focus groups, participants were able to share ideas from their experiences in the role and to explore and discuss common successes and challenges (as also evidenced in Breen, 2006; Powell & Single, 1996). The coding of these qualitative data provided researchers with insights into the feelings, beliefs, reactions, and experiences, results that are not typically available using other research methods (Morgan, 1997). Data gathered from journal entries, reflective responses, and focus groups can help identify issues important to participants and can offer ideas for further inquiry (Powell & Single, 1996). The use of focus groups provided the opportunity to understand perspectives of a certain group of individuals with a

common experience (Gerber & Smith, 2006; Morgan, 1997) and also allowed the researchers to gather large amounts of qualitative data in a short period of time about personal experiences when facilitating inclusion.

Participants

At the onset of the study, there were 11 inclusion coaches involved. Four months into the school year, 2 additional inclusion coaches were added to the team, thus increasing the participants in this study from 11 to 13. The role of the inclusion coaches involved individually supporting schools approximately 4 days per week and meeting as a group on the fifth day for debriefing, knowledge sharing, and professional development. Each coach was responsible for supporting 3 to 4 schools where they worked 1 to 2 days per week with several teachers (partners), each of whom had a child with an exceptionality in class. The 13 female coaches were all employed by the school board. Coaches were carefully selected by the school board in response to a job posting regarding an inclusive practice initiative. All coaches were certified educators with the Ontario College of Teachers and had special education training and an average of 12 years of experience in various capacities including contained classes, special education resource educators, inclusive classroom educators, and board special education support personnel. Coaches had been involved in ongoing professional development and training in inclusive education.

The coaches developed partnerships with 26 educators in all, from both the elementary and secondary panel. The educators who partnered with the coaches included elementary ($n = 14$), secondary ($n = 7$), special education ($n = 2$), and not specified ($n = 3$) with an average of 15.14 years of teaching experience (range = 4 to 28 years; median = 13 years). Two of the 26 educators had special education qualifications.

Procedure

In September 2013, the inclusion coaches were invited to participate in semi-structured reflective responses and focus group discussions through a letter of invitation (via email) that outlined the purpose of the research. Coaches were randomly assigned email addresses in order to identify their reflective responses for future data collection purposes and as a confidential means to correspond with the researchers and reply to the reflective response prompts. Initial prompts were emailed to the coaches who then participated in online journaling by answering thought-provoking questions regarding their experiences over an 8-week period from the beginning of the school year. Consenting coaches replied via email.

The reflective response questions listed below were developed by the research team in order to encourage the coaches to reflect on their practice in an authentic and personal way and engage in transformative learning. Since salient experiences are important for the development of inclusive pedagogy and transformative learning, both job-related and student-focused questions were emailed to the participants, who responded to the initial email within two weeks.

1. Reflecting on your initial weeks of the job, was it what you were prepared for/what you were expecting? How has your outlook changed/stayed the same? Elaborate on your reflection.
2. Describe a salient experience that you had with a student with an exceptionality.
3. Thinking back, cite an example or situation that you had with a student with an exceptionality that was challenging.
4. What do you anticipate will be your challenges in the upcoming six-week period? (e.g., practical, attitudinal, personal). Please elaborate on the perceived nature of these challenges.

Responses were extracted from the emails and compiled into one file according to question in order to compare responses and identify themes to be used in the development of the focus group questions. All participants individually submitted electronic reflective response data, and these were alphanumerically coded for anonymity and analyzed for trends.

The initial focus group took place four months into the school year, and inclusion coaches were separated into two groups (secondary or elementary) based on the panel for which they provided support. It was decided to create these groups in order to have smaller numbers and to allow for more similarity of experiences in the discussion. The questions for the focus groups were developed by the researchers based on salient themes that emerged from the reflective responses. In reviewing the transcripts from the reflective responses, the following reoccurring key words and indigenous categories emerged: process of changing perceptions, resistance/challenges, capacity building, and students. These themes inspired the development of the focus group prompts in order to elicit further responses pertinent to the research questions:

1. Have your views of inclusion changed (social, etc.)? How?
2. What are some ways or strategies you used to teach teachers to practice more inclusively?
3. What are some issues and strategies to overcome these issues concerning balancing the development of a belonging classroom culture with meeting the educational needs of the students?
4. How do you best empower the teacher you support so that capacity is built and skills/knowledge are translated next and subsequent years?
5. What universal/UDL strategies are you implementing and how are they received and/or working? Describe the context.

During the focus groups, the questions were asked one at a time in order to allow each inclusion coach the opportunity to respond. Participants were encouraged to freely comment on each other's points in order to evoke a naturally flowing conversation. The focus groups lasted approximately 70 minutes and were audio recorded. Resulting audio data were stored electronically and then transcribed by the researchers. The participants were alphanumerically coded to maintain anonymity.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the audio recordings were verified by a second researcher for accuracy. Member checks by participants were not completed in order to preserve authenticity of responses. As the focus groups were designed to capture the experiences of the coaches at a specific time, member checks might have caused participants to alter responses based on new experiences or personal growth. Upon completion of the first reflective response and the focus group, the data were screened to identify emerging themes that address the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Due to the narrative nature of the data, the constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to code the data from the reflective response document and the focus group transcription into categories and themes relevant to the research questions (Lichtman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2002). Using this method, two researchers assigned codes to relevant ideas to reduce the data, facilitate reliability, and aid comparison. Data were then coded and grouped manually by looking at each participant's responses and assigning them to the corresponding theme.

Findings

The results from qualitative analyses unveiled several themes that highlighted the barriers posed to the role of the inclusion coaches to support educators in inclusive classroom practice. For the purposes of this paper, the following four themes will be discussed: systemic barriers, personal growth, support for educators, and coaches supporting coaches.

Systemic Barriers

Among the majority of secondary coaches and approximately a third of primary coaches, systemic barriers that influenced personal job expectations was an emergent theme of the focus group questions and showcased some of the unanticipated challenges encountered. More specifically, coaches conveyed feeling optimistic and energetic about the initiative; however, their initial idea of collaborating to create a sense of community and belonging was unexpectedly met with barriers at the system and educator level. Although some administrators and teachers were eager to embrace inclusive practice, not all were open and welcome to the change. One coach indicated that "many teachers did not even know why we were there [in the classroom]; they saw me as someone from the board coming in to make sure they were doing their job." In addition, coaches were surprised to discover that educators in the regular class were selected by administrators to be involved in the project as opposed to educators requesting available support as a means to improve their practice. Overall, coaches enthusiastically started the school year expecting that they would be a welcomed support for schools, and in fact, this was not the case in all instances.

Coaches noted a lack of understanding about their role by school principals, which resulted in principals redefining their roles and setting parameters as opposed to fully utilizing the coach to maximize collaboration and to improve student outcomes. For example, one coach described being provided a workspace in the school and being told that educators and faculty would approach the coach there if s/he required assistance,

“People don’t want you in their classroom, and people didn’t choose to work with me, they were told to be with me.”

Not surprisingly, educators also misunderstood the coach’s role, and this was reflected in their negative attitudes toward the coaches and inclusion. Several coaches described being expected to work in the context of an educational assistant and support the student in the classroom rather than in the capacity of a coach to collaborate and problem solve with the classroom teachers. “She [the teacher] told me that she was just happy to have an extra set of hands in the classroom to work with the student [with special needs].” Coaches expressed that they were not prepared for this reaction, nor able to resolve educator’s negative attitudes through individual conversation, since the negativity was inherent in the atmosphere in which the educators worked.

Discordant beliefs about the benefits of inclusion also presented a problem when communicating with school personnel (e.g., principal, classroom teacher, resource teacher, educational assistant, parents, and student). One coach recounted being “accidentally” introduced to a teacher as “the exclusion coach” by the principal, who afterward corrected him/herself, saying “Oops, I mean inclusion coach.” Although the principal clarified this “Freudian slip,” the coach expressed feeling awkward and unwelcomed in the school and experienced further tension when interacting with the teachers. This illustrates that some administrators’ and educators’ perceptions of the project were not aligned with the perceptions of the coaches and school board members.

Coaches reported a range of opinions with respect to the effectiveness of inclusion toward meeting the needs of students in their schools. Although coaches held strong positive beliefs about the inclusive model, they found that staff varied in their degree of willingness to move forward with the inclusive model. Six weeks into the term many coaches were discouraged to discover they had not made the progress with the educators that they initially envisioned. “We thought we would have all this practice laid out, a beautiful inquiry cycle going ... you thought you were going to be ‘here,’ but in reality it didn’t come together like that.” Coaches described experiences that depicted the negative attitudes and uncertainty educators had about inclusive learning. In sum, coaches did not anticipate discordant beliefs to exist about the overall vision that administrators, educators, and families had for fostering successful students and about the inclusive initiative as a means of achieving that goal. Although coaches expressed the view that their role did not unfold as expected, they were not discouraged and continued to plan ways to initiate changes in the upcoming term.

Personal Growth

As a result of the challenges experienced by the coaches, all secondary coaches and the majority of elementary coaches were able to recognize and discuss their personal level of growth. Expectations initially held by the coaches shifted to adapt to the notion that implementing a change in practice was a slower-than-expected process. The change involved several localized variables that needed to work together in order for global change to occur. In turn, the coaches adjusted their expectations with respect to how they personally perceived their success.

It's a bit of a roller coaster. We over-complicate things and I think we have a mindset that we think of all the ways it [inclusion] can't be successful. We are the road block and we over-complicate things ... let's just try ... maybe it will work out, maybe it won't, but we will learn something from it.

Coaches' perceptions of success changed from one characterized by a holistic vision of community and capacity building to improve student outcomes to one in which they identified successes as they occurred on a variety of levels. They described celebrating the "baby steps" that demonstrated their effectiveness in implementing the model in the schools: "Maybe it's not that big jump but the movement." Some examples included observing an educator implementing a strategy suggested earlier, or watching the novel learning experience of a student shape the educator's perspective on inclusive teaching practice. Finally, coaches' expectations about what educators gain from their partnership have evolved from understanding *why* the program was implemented to also appreciating *how* the program is beneficial for all the students in the classroom. One secondary coach eloquently described the impact of this evolution on the school community:

It's impacting educators in the building because they know that inclusion is happening in our board, and they're seeing the kids [with special needs] out more, and they're seeing that it is possible, that you can make a community in the whole school and not just in one classroom or in one situation. They see students are talking to each other in the hallways more, they are being included in the hallways and having conversations because they're actually out of the room [self-contained classroom]. We've had parents come realizing that the opportunities are out there for them [their children with special needs] to make connections and have relationships that go beyond the little hallway.

In terms of personal growth, all coaches acknowledged that questioning their practice and approach, as well as engaging in personal reflection regarding moving forward, allowed their own perceptions of inclusion to change. As the partnerships developed with educators, coaches began to encourage partners to have conversations and to question their practice. The coaches also described their own level of learning and perceptions as having changed and evolved through reflection on experiences. For example, one coach described her inclusive experiences as having left a marked impression: "Once you see it [inclusion], you can't un-see it, and it's hard to not go into the classroom with that sort of lens." Another coach explained the impact that observation had on the shift in her change process:

I am finding out that more and more it isn't about inclusion, it's about good teaching practices ... there's nothing else you need much beyond that: In terms of coaching and building capacity, it's questioning and observation that have been hugely powerful.

Experiential learning and reflection enabled coaches to fully experience and understand the impact of the shift. Coaches involved in this project already had beliefs deeply rooted in inclusion, yet they noted that the impact of inclusion did not become vivid until witnessed by both the coach and the educator firsthand. For example, one coach described an experience she had with a student who was labelled as globally delayed. This student was described as not able to identify the letters or letter sounds of language. One day while included in the regular classroom, this student was observed to

correctly recognize the names of peers on an interactive white board and to initiate pulling the names into a virtual box to take attendance. The impact of this experience was two-fold: It revealed the extent of the student's capacity, that is, this student was able to recognize words as a whole; and the coach realized that capacity could not be built until educators witnessed, and were personally impacted by, the benefits of inclusion firsthand. Because of this, this coach realized that it was her job to facilitate the environment so that these experiences could happen.

In another example of a salient experience, a music teacher who thought s/he was demonstrating inclusion by having a student from a previously self-contained classroom in the music class was astonished to discover the difference between charity-based and authentic inclusion. In this situation the student dazzled peers and teacher with his/her ability to keep a rhythm in turn creating a baseline of his/her knowledge of the subject matter. In turn, these experiences had positive implications for the future social (e.g., peer relationships) and academic (changes in individual education plans) opportunities for this student with exceptionalities.

The coaches in these examples recognized that in order for effective partnerships to occur, educators needed to witness inclusion prior to accepting and seeking collaboration from the coaches. This realization prompted coaches to reconsider and restructure their approaches in the classroom and the school.

Coaches unanimously agreed that it was through their partnerships that they learned more about themselves, educators, and especially the students they were serving. These insights exemplify the knowledge gained about student learning style, capacity, and ability to relate to his or her peers, which may not have otherwise been detected without the opportunities within an inclusive classroom. Coaches further reported that these lived experiences which had a salient impact are what makes them better educators and ultimately influences their perception of change.

Support for Educators

All of the inclusion coaches identified their belief that in some capacity their support contributed to facilitating change in teachers' practices and attitudes. One coach mentioned "trying to highlight the things they're doing already—labelling the learning or teaching strategy for them that would be in the classroom—so that they'll recognize it." Coaches measured the success of their support by the changes they witnessed in the classrooms and in the educators with whom they worked. In one particular school in which a self-contained special education class recently closed, the coach shared that, of the teachers there,

I've had three of them come and speak to me direct about that they didn't believe this [inclusion] would work and they changed their minds, and they're not even the ones ... having those kids in the classroom, they're on the periphery of that. We've got to get a bigger bandwagon.

Coaches have all recognized that the most important factor in building capacity and change is to first develop a solid trusting relationship. Regarding building relationships,

we are feeling comfortable asking them [partners] how to have some of these conversations [about changing practice]... It's in those moment conversations when you can say "What about this?" ... and not feel like you're passing judgment. It's like two working together for the benefit of the kids.

As coaches they were striving to develop a trusting rapport with their teacher partners, they were constructively questioning the educators and encouraging their reflection, which they identified as effective techniques for their own personal improvement of practice.

Half of the coaches specifically discussed scaffolding inclusion with their partners and attempted to "meet teachers where they are at" to help them grow and encourage risk taking. "It's about empowering teachers to support capacities; it's that kind of gradual release model." Coaches believed that it was important to provide positive feedback to educators, which included pointing out what educators are currently doing well and/or highlighting a time when they executed a lesson or addressed a situation effectively. This technique positively reaffirmed that what educators were already doing was good, and it encouraged them to take more risks, ultimately building capacity to change practice. One coach shared an example of what this risk taking looked like. In her example she indicated that her partner told her, "I set myself up to fail every time you come in." Delighted by her comment, the coach told the research team, "What she is really saying is that she is trying something new." These moments mark important milestones for inclusion and are regarded as an exciting step for the coaches. Coaches noted they enjoyed watching their partners go through the same change process that they are concomitantly experiencing, and are pleased to have the ability to support and encourage this collaborative learning process.

Another key strategy identified for supporting educators included modelling and guiding the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a timely and natural extension to what is already happening in the classroom. Many examples were shared relating the coaches' suggestions for using UDL strategies that would specifically address the needs of the students with exceptionalities, and benefit the learning outcomes of all the students in the classroom. One coach shared a story about a partner who was very reluctant to change her seating plan to promote the social development of one student: "She was not ready, and one day I went in and they [the students' desks] were in groups and she said she should have done it months ago." The coaches also identified several other strategies they used to support the educators, build relationships, and encourage change. Coaches served as a listening ear for their partners when working out challenges, offering resources and professional development sessions, and planning and co-teaching lessons around building community in the classroom. The coaches worked to raise awareness in the entire school and community and to support three of the schools who participated in a disabilities awareness day, which was covered by the local media.

Coaches Supporting Coaches

Considering the coaches' job expectations as well as the challenges they discussed, it is not surprising that the final theme delves into the unique relationship shared among the coaches. The value of support for each other was acknowledged during the focus group

discussion by nearly all secondary-school coaches and approximately half of primary-school coaches. Weekly meetings provided the platform for coaches to decompress, share accomplishments, problem solve, and encourage one another as they translated their knowledge and beliefs about inclusion into practice. During the focus group, coaches verbally and non-verbally (e.g., with smiles, head nods) acknowledged the importance of weekly meetings together. Coaches commented that without the weekly opportunities to debrief, share experiences, and provide support, they might not have made it through the workweek effectively. Meeting with one another on a regular basis provided coaches with a sense of safety and support when sharing the accomplishments and struggles faced during the week.

Coaches discussed the unanticipated barriers that filtered from the board level into the classroom level, which ultimately affected their role in the classroom. At the secondary-school level, all coaches disclosed that administrative barriers such as a lack of communication between the school board and participating schools resulted in a misunderstanding of the coach's role in the classroom. Although coaches were empowered to support educators by providing them with strategies and to build capacity for teaching inclusive classrooms, educators' reluctance to collaborate made the coaches feel that their role was more akin to that of an itinerant or an educational assistant. Such attitudes stem from the lack of knowledge and understanding about the program at the school level.

Despite some of the difficulties that can prevent a smooth implementation of the initiative, weekly meetings provided coaches with the opportunities to share successes and challenges and to collaborate on effective techniques for approaching issues faced during the week. Coaches reported feeling reassured that although they came from different places, sharing their experiences with each other empowered them to continue to make a difference in the lives of educators and of their students with learning needs.

Discussion

To examine a coaching model of professional development, the current study analyzed the experiences of inclusion coaches to better understand the variables that contributed, or posed a barrier, to the process of change as a function of a school board transition in service delivery toward inclusive practice. This research captured the qualitative experiences of 13 coaches in their roles supporting educators during a system-wide change of service delivery to an inclusive model of education. Findings revealed systemic variables, personal growth, support for one another, and support for respective educators were important for implementing change and practicing inclusive education. Critical evaluation of these four themes indicated that reflection about teaching practice throughout the change process was a critical component in defining the coaching role. Consistent with Transformative Learning Theory (Cranton, 2007), coaches recognized that engaging in reflective practice was also essential for educators. In order to embody the breadth of inclusive practice, educators and coaches alike required the lived experience to understand what inclusion meant and looked like. Here we focus on the themes that emerged from the data as they relate to the role of the inclusion coaches and their support of the change process, as well as on the variables that require further

examination. We conclude by discussing implications of this research for educational practice.

Although coaches had a passion for inclusion and supported the board's inclusive initiative, their job expectations did not unfold as anticipated. Through their partnership experiences, coaches discovered that there was a lack of knowledge about their perceived role in the schools. In turn, coaches' expectations for this new service delivery initiative were changed. Coaches initially anticipated quick and favourable outcomes for both educators and students. Similar to previous research (Morris & Sharma, 2011), elbow-partner coaches in this research found that a change process in this capacity takes time and is influenced by the support of administrators, school culture, teachers' attitudes, and teachers' perceptions of the coaches' role in the classroom.

School culture is developed through leadership in the school, and this responsibility is chiefly the role of the school administrator. The way in which a principal leads school staff has great influence on the ability of educators to engage in a process of change in attitude and pedagogy in relation to inclusive practice. Ineffective communication about change between the principal and staff, paired with insufficient time developing mentorship roles in the school, may result in teachers who are not willing to collaborate, and in turn, may create an environment in which it is difficult for change and coaching to occur (Gross, 2012). A positive school culture nurtures and supports the learning needs of students at the administrative level. Educational leaders who supported and encouraged educators toward positive change developed relationships with their staff, provided opportunities for professional development and personal growth, and understood how policies facilitated in a supportive learning environment (Furney, Aiken, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). School-based leaders must also have supportive and positive partnerships with their administrators at the board level to ensure that there is a shared understanding of new policies and practices that will involve the schools. Knowledge about the current project's impact for students with exceptionalities may not have been translated well in the schools and may have subsequently affected the educators' attitudes toward inclusion and the coaching initiative. It is important to note that research has reported varying attitudes and opinions about fully inclusive education, so this may not have been a function of administrative misunderstanding (e.g., Berry, 2011; Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Gibbs, 2007). It is uncertain the extent to which educator beliefs and previous experience about inclusion played a role in their collaborations with the coaches.

Through their observations, reflections, and experiences, coaches developed a greater understanding of the challenges facing the implementation of inclusive practices and, in turn, have become more confident when challenging, supporting, and encouraging educators through this system-wide change. Although the coaches faced, and continue to face, challenging barriers beyond their control (e.g., resistance from administration and staff), they developed connections and partnerships with educators and have identified that changes are taking place. Consistent with the literature (Morris & Sharma, 2011), coaches continue to employ frequent communication and good working relationships with staff to minimize or negate any potential barriers that could pose challenges for working in a partnership such as this.

The hurdles and barriers reported in this research came with a silver lining. Coaches reported that the unexpected challenges were the precipice of personal growth and the beginning of a move forward in the direction of inclusive ideology. Other variables that contributed to the coaches' ability to grow and transform in their own learning included engaging in professional development and personal reflection, celebrating successes, observing practice, and collaborating with fellow coaches and educators. Research on the effectiveness of literacy coaching demonstrated that coaching involves discussing mutual goals that educators and coaches have, followed by reflecting on how to optimally achieve those goals using objectives, assessments, and learning outcomes (Buly, Coskie, Robinson, & Egawa, 2006). Coach roles, administrative support, and educators' resistance are barriers common in the related coaching literature (e.g., Gross, 2012; Morris & Sharma, 2011); however, it is also evident that successful coaching is an evolving process, which requires reflection on experience and administrative support (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). In recent coaching literature (Feighan & Heeren, 2009), educators reported that that greater student engagement also resulted from the support educators received from the coaches, along with an increased confidence in their own teaching practice.

Through the aforementioned experiences, the perception of the change process has also evolved for coaches. Coaches reported re-evaluating an earlier perception of success to include recognizing that success as a whole (or the "big picture") was influenced at many levels and by many variables. The coaches acknowledged that inclusion wasn't about all the strategies and changes, but rather "about good teaching practice." As a result of this growth, coaches acknowledged that moving forward they will approach their role differently to be more effective educators and mentors. By reflecting and experimenting on their practice, coaches and educators alike may have felt empowered, confident, and autonomous to make purposeful pedagogical changes (Pyhältö, et al., 2012; Richardson, 1998).

Coaches recognized that strong partnerships needed to be established in order for any change process to occur. Developing trust and relationships is important in coaching, as it provides an opportunity to have constructive conversations about mutual goals that will benefit the students. When these conversations occur between partners who have a good rapport, collaborative and non-judgmental discussions take place, and educators are more agreeable to incorporating change into their practice (Buly, et al., 2006; Swafford, 1998). Consistent with the literature, the coach's role in this study was to provide educators with multiple levels of professional and personal support during the transition and change processes (Boyle et al., 2012; Morris & Sharma, 2011; Strieker, 2012; Swafford, 1998). It was evident based on the coaches' experiences that some teachers had a negative perception of the coaches' role as being evaluative. Ensuring educators have an understanding about the supportive and collaborative role coaches serve in the classroom is an integral component of partnership. Scaffolding and modelling were essential strategies that supported educators' knowledge development regarding inclusion and its application in the UDL classroom. Although the coaches developed schemas about what good practices for working with educators look like, it was premature in this phase of the study to identify specific strategies that were effective for all educators. Coaches recommended individually assessing the needs of each educator in order to

establish what types of strategies and support would best complement each partnership and classroom.

Finally, a theme that resonated among all coaches was how invaluable it had been to provide support for one another was. As part of the school board inclusion initiative, mandatory weekly meetings embedded in the coaches' responsibilities provided the opportunity to discuss the challenges and successes and to work collaboratively to move forward with their colleagues. Previous coaching research (Boyle et al., 2012; Morris & Sharma, 2011; Strieker, 2012; Swafford, 1998) identified similar issues and challenges as those experienced by the coaches in this research; these impacted the coaches' ability to fulfill their role effectively. These challenges might have been avoided if coaches had had the opportunity to debrief with one another. In the current project, coaches met weekly and supported one another by sharing practices that both complemented and hampered the evolution of their own practice and role. Consistent with Brigham's (2011) findings surrounding the transformative learning that occurred through the support that immigrant teachers provided one another, coaches in this study also grew in their thinking and emotional appreciation for one another. Although the coaches were in different places with respect to their growth and involvement in the classroom, they valued coming together and supporting each other in moving forward. Previous research found that seeking and providing advice improved both parties' self-efficacy, capacity to solve problems through collaboration, and ability to improve student achievement (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012). This study has revealed that implementing change of this calibre may not be synergistic, and its success involves clear communication among stakeholders, policy makers, and educators. The uptake of knowledge about board- and school-wide initiatives is influenced by the support of administrators, and their support is also integral in building an inclusive school culture involving all staff and students. Recognizing that system change of this nature takes time (5–7 years; Goldenberg, 2004), it is important that all parties at each level are collaboratively involved in the process (Dworski-Riggs & Langhout, 2010). When all parties are informed and accountable, effective collaboration can take place.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Although four themes were revealed through coaches' personal experiences and reflections, several other themes involving external factors must be considered. The findings of the current study illustrate that a disconnect may exist between the staff members' and school board's visions about the inclusive policy and its implementation. Further research must address the role that policy-makers have in conveying knowledge to administration. In addition, the role of administration in creating inclusive school culture should be considered. Finally, teacher perceptions and attitudes toward exceptionalities should be examined as a possible factor in coaches' ability to support inclusion. Although comments were made regarding issues with implementation of the coaching model, which may have had an impact on the coaches' experiences, this topic is outside the scope of this paper and should be considered for future analyses.

This research has provided insight into the strategies coaches have identified as effective in supporting educators during transition and providing information about

classroom requirements (e.g., supports, resources, services). First and foremost, coaches recommended prioritizing and initiating rapport and trust building at the beginning of the term. In addition to supportive partnerships, coaches benefit from having the support of their colleagues in order to be more effective in their coaching roles. Administrative and attitudinal barriers such as teacher perception of disability require intervention in order for coaches to successfully influence change. Educators new to inclusive practice have gained insight into how to create inclusive teaching styles, cultivate a supportive classroom culture, and gain an appreciation for challenges experienced by students with exceptionalities. In turn, educators and coaches have provided optimal academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities. This research also provides insight into what practices (e.g., inclusive classroom practices, the coaching model, UDL, etc.) are currently working and should be continued as well as into the benefits of engaging in reflective practice as a means of personal growth.

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