From Vision to Reality: views of primary school principals on inclusive education in New South Wales, Australia

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Abstract
This paper discusses the findings of a research study that used semi-structured interviews to explore the views of primary school principals[1] on inclusive education in New South Wales, Australia. Content analysis of the transcript data indicates that principals' attitudes towards inclusive education and their success in engineering inclusive practices within their school are significantly affected by their own conception of what "inclusion" means, as well as the characteristics of the school community, and the attitudes and capacity of staff. In what follows, we present two parallel conversations that arose from the interview data to illustrate the main conceptual divisions existing between our participants' conceptions of inclusion. First, we discuss the act of "being inclusive" which was perceived mainly as an issue of culture and pedagogy. Second, we consider the mechanics of "including," which reflected a more instrumentalist position based on perceptions of individual student deficit, the level of support they may require and the amount of funding they can attract.

Keywords: inclusion, inclusive education, principals, primary schools, attitudes, behaviour, social inclusion.

Introduction

New South Wales (NSW) is the largest state in Australia comprising one third of the national population. Government schools educate approximately two thirds of the K-12 schooling population in NSW with over 2240 schools and some three quarters of a million students. Of these, 6.7% have a diagnosis fitting within the categories of disability eligible for support in New South Wales government schools (Graham & Sweller in press). A continuum of provision for students with a disability exists within the government school sector. This extends from full-time attendance in a regular classroom within a "mainstream" school, to enrolment in a Support Class (or special education unit) that is housed within certain schools located within a school district,[2] to attendance in separate special schools (called Schools for Specific Purposes).

Prior research by the first author has found that the use of special schools and support classes has increased significantly in New South Wales over the last 15 years (Graham & Sweller in press).[3] Disaggregation of NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) enrolment data shows that certain children appear less welcome in their local school than others, particularly those who require complex support and/or present with challenging behaviour. While this research found that secondary schools are more responsible for the

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increase in segregation than primary, a number of recent reports from both state and national primary principals associations have called for a new charter for primary schooling (APPA 2007). Each of these reports and associated press coverage have attributed significant strain on primary schools to the philosophy and practice of including "special needs/disabled students" (PSPF 2009, p. 1) "because they soak up so many resources" (APPA 2008, p. 1). This study therefore sought to begin by mapping the perspectives of primary school principals in an effort to better understand what is happening to inclusive education in New South Wales and why.

The Study

There are over 1600 government primary schools across the State catering for approximately 400,000 students from Kindergarten to Year 6. To recruit schools for the study, the researchers conducted a search of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training "Schools Locator" database (see NSWDET 2009).[4] Understanding that the experience of schools located in remote and rural areas would be different from those based in metropolitan areas, we chose to invite participants that would provide a deliberate mix of country/rural schools, plus an additional five from schools in the greater Sydney metropolitan area. Schools that included the terms 'inclusion', 'diversity', 'inclusive education' and 'inclusive community' in their website information were contacted to participate in this study.

A small sample (15) of primary K-6 government school principals were invited to participate in the research. 13 participants representing 8 out of the 10 New South Wales Department of Education and Training school regions participated via in-depth open-ended interviews lasting from 60 to 150 minutes (average 120 mins). Each interview was audio-taped and included questions relating to five broad topics:

1) The school context (history, community demographics, enrolment size, number of staff and support personnel);
2) The school's approach to inclusive education (philosophy, vision, aim, pedagogy);
3) Processes relating to the assessment, identification, referral and support of students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or challenging behaviour and other groups of students identified by the principals as receiving additional support services;
4) Specific questions relating to barriers raised in relation to funding and resources;
5) Principals' perceptions of the success/failure and future of inclusion.

The first two topics above were sufficiently open-ended to allow the principals to present and discuss their own understanding of inclusive education in relation to the specific characteristics of the school. In this way the researchers aimed to avoid imposing a specific understanding of "inclusion" on the interview process.[5]

Ten of the thirteen principals are male and three female. All but two principals have been in their current school for less than five years. The schools participating in the study varied on size from 80 students to almost 800, with mainly medium and large size schools represented in the sample. Six of the schools have adjoined Support Classes reserved for students with a disability. During the interviews, principals were asked to indicate the socioeconomic status (SES) of the community and, when mapped against Tony Vinson's (2007) social geography of disadvantage in Australia, the sample reflects good fit with the existing range of socioeconomic strata (see Figure 1 in Appendix). In terms of the population

composition of the schools (Figure 2, Appendix), three are highly diverse in terms of Language Background Other than English (LBOTE), three are diverse, two approximate the state average, and two were considered to have a mainly Anglo-Australian school population. Nine schools have students from an Aboriginal and/or Pacific Islander background and five schools cater for students who are New Arrivals (refugee status). As we will discuss later in this paper, the contextual characteristics of a school and its community inform discussions of diversity and define what inclusive education means in specific schools.

Data Analysis

Our research produced 13 interview transcripts each ranging from 20 to 40 pages in length. The first author, who had attended and taken notes during each of the interviews, re-read these transcripts closely 'to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole' (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1279), whilst making further notes. Following the principles of inductive content analysis (Berg 2001), a series of inductive categories were chosen to describe the main themes emerging. Derived directly from the data itself rather than from theory or the research literature (Glaser & Strauss 1967), these themes formed a list of categories and sub-categories which each corresponded to a unique code. Additional codes were added when necessary until themes were exhausted (Berg, 2007). While we will touch on some of these themes here, the overall focus of this paper is on one particular finding: that local context and experience shapes/reinforces perceptions about inclusive education and the actions of those involved. For example, one of the main research questions posed to our participants was, "What does inclusive education mean to you?" While there were a number of specific responses to this question, it also functioned as an organising concept for the research project and subsequent interview schedule. As a result, the interview transcripts provided a wealth of rich qualitative data and many discussion threads related either directly to this overarching question or bore significant relation to it.

Viewing Inclusion

Our analysis of the interview transcripts indicates that inclusive education is conceptualised at both macro and micro levels: at a whole school/community level, and/or at the level of certain individuals. The term "being inclusive" encapsulates the macro view. The "inclusivity" of the schools relates to the particular characteristics of the community and the principals gave vivid accounts of what "being inclusive" means "in this context". At this level, principals' invoked a meta-language to draw on "big-picture" issues that affect a school's ability to "be inclusive." These include student assessment, school competition, parent choice, social disadvantage, cultural diversity, parent dis/engagement, the changing role and organisation of schools, and funding constraints. Although principals bring their own perceptions and understandings to the schools in which they operate, the demands of the education system for academic performance indicators and the existing systems for allocation of resources seem to reinforce the perceptions of some, leading to a sharpening of the diagnostic lens upon individuals in need of "inclusion."

There is therefore much less conceptual variation when some principals refer to the "inclusion" of students with "special educational needs." These principals adopted a specific, micro-level discourse that individuated student support "needs." This had the effect of intellectually compartmentalising both the concept of and practices relating to inclusive education. In these discussions, an individual student's "capacity to be included" is very much

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related to the level of "resources" allocated to them via diagnosis and the type and severity of disability with which they had been (or possibly could be) classified. This, we found, was the case in most, but not all, of the participating schools. It was at this micro-level that the interplay between student performance, medical diagnosis and resource allocation became both the reason and means to identify the child to be "included." In the following two sections, we present samples from these meta and micro-level discourses to illustrate the main conceptual divisions existing between our participants' conceptions of inclusion to then consider how these perceptions may be affecting the realisation of a genuinely "inclusive" education system across New South Wales.

"Being Inclusive" versus "Including Them"

Gillian Fulcher (1989) argued that principals' perceptions, in combination with the school and community environment, create the actual space where inclusion is enacted. We found that principals' perceptions of inclusive education are informed by their own understandings and attitudes towards inclusion as well as the contextual characteristics of their schools. In other words, principals do not form their perceptions in a vacuum. The process is reciprocal: context influences perceptions, perceptions influence attitudes and, in return, attitudes influence the context. Interestingly, while issues of disability and "special educational needs" were significant in all schools, in schools located in disadvantaged areas a more complex picture of "needs" emerged. In such schools, a number of attributes such as socioeconomic status, non-English speaking background, refugee status, and Aboriginality come together with learning difficulties, challenging behaviour and disability. The role of the school then becomes, according to one principal: "To unravel kids' lives – that's a major thing here. Just unravelling their lives before you can start the educational process" *(Principal: 12).* A different picture was presented by a principal in an affluent area of Sydney with previous experience in disadvantaged schools: "It's just another world where your focus is on education and P&C [Parents and Citizens Association] generates the same amount of money the government gives us each year" *(Principal: 9).*

Across the 13 schools visited during the study only three principals expressed satisfaction with the overall level of funding and resources they received. One of those schools (Principal 9 above) served families from a high socioeconomic area and received large amounts of funding via parent contributions and community fund-raising. The importance of socio-economic context, its effect upon perceptions of difference and the meaning of "inclusive education" became starkly apparent when travelling from affluent to disadvantaged areas of the state. However, an intriguing paradox emerged.

Principals of culturally diverse schools in disadvantaged areas (or with significant experience of teaching in them) had a much broader view of what constitutes an "average" school child, than those with the majority of their experience in more advantaged and/or less diverse schools. This had implications as to how children were perceived and, in turn, how schools enacted policies and practices relating to inclusive education.

> We're a middle-class type school. You see the kids – we've got [700+] kids, and most of them, when you see them around the place, they're blonde, they're blue-eyed, they're Anglo-Saxon… they're just lovely kids *(Principal: 8)*

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> Our whole system here is all about inclusivity, because, yeah, all our kids have special needs. I mean, it sounds very trite, but that's true. There's very few of our kids who don't have some kind of special need, even though they might not fit into a funding box. *(Principal: 6)*

A shift in discourses that spoke of "including them" versus those that described "being inclusive" was evident early in the data collection. Over time a solid theme emerged: the more culturally diverse the school, the more expansive the view of inclusive education. To these principals, inclusive education meant "being inclusive" which was taken to encompass cultural, social, economic and ethnic differences. Indeed in one school, we were asked what "version" of inclusive education we were researching. In that school limiting "inclusivity" to students with a disability or special educational needs was seen as highly problematic and a much broader view of "inclusion" was seen as relevant to the school. In response to the question, "What does inclusive education mean to you?" one principal working in a Priority Action School serving a highly disadvantaged community (see Figure 1, Appendix) replied "I would have taken it as meaning… cultural inclusivity. That would be what I would have thought you'd start to talk about." *(Principal: 6)*

Broader issues relating to social inclusion are central in this view of inclusive education. Schools in diverse communities are required to integrate their support services in trying to maximise their efficiency and overall effectiveness. In addition, these schools expand their educational role by catering for the basic needs of their students. For example, one principal reported: "We've got a breakfast programme here for kids because they don't have breakfast. We had to change our lunchtime to 11:30 because the kids had nothing until 1:00… We have welfare lunches here". The meaning of "diversity" and "inclusivity," however, are not straightforward in these principals' accounts. Diversity in some instances may well be viewed as a "deviation" from the experiences, aspirations and expectations of the school.

> Most of us come from fairly middle-class backgrounds, and most teachers, unless they've been in resource schools or had a lot of years teaching experience, have got no understanding of what the poor kids are suffering out there. *(Principal: 6)*

> They've seen things and they've done things and they've experienced things that you and I would never have seen. We've got kids here who have seen murders. We've got kids here who have seen their parents drugged out. We've got kids here whose parents can't get them to school, they get themselves to school with no shoes on and we've got to clothe them when they get here. *(Principal: 12)*

This implicitly negative construction of diversity becomes more apparent when students, schools, or parenting styles are compared in terms of academic expectations and educational outcomes:

No readiness for school. Some of them haven't picked up a pencil… A significant number of kids come to school with very limited language experience. And so that takes years to then work on and improve, so that they are performing well in assessment. *(Principal: 6)*

Elsewhere however, we found the more homogeneous the school population and local community the more interview discussions revolved around the integration of individual students with a disability and the add-on staff and services required to cater for them:

We've got half a dozen… kids who have very, very special help. I've just got to get my reference sheet here to tell you who they are, or what the problem is… That money gives us a chance of supporting the child in the regular classroom, so they're not isolated at all. The teacher's aide is there, sitting right beside them, doing all the help that's needed for a special case. *(Principal: 8)*

In this school, the "half a dozen" students for which the school received Funding Support[6] constitute the main focus of "inclusive education." However, the practices described here, as well as in some other participating schools, can probably be more appropriately described as "special" education. In these schools, "general" education and "mainstream" schooling existed as relatively unchallenged concepts. The persistence of the belief that the "average" primary school is and should be for the "average" child was evident in a number of principals' comments. In these instances, the burden posed by students who require additional support was perceived as detracting from the school's capacity to attend to what various stakeholders deem to be the "core business" of primary schooling, narrowly described as "student learning" (APPA 2007). That core business however, is strangely bound up with very normative ideals as to what constitutes *valued* learning (e.g., as measured by benchmark assessments and that which stands to improve the school's competitive status). In such cases, constructions of "normal" or "average" ability and (by extension) disability are set in relation to normative curriculum standards and additional funding is sought to provide "something extra" for those who cannot meet the standards by way of general provision:

You see, really, we've almost got to cope with next to no help for our remedial kids. Then you have the next layer down, if you want to think of it in those terms –it's not a great way to think of it, but that's what it is. The more negative layer down; your special needs kids … you've got your kids with funding, which is a big tick in the box, that's not so bad but if those special needs kids have got no funding at all, already you're pushing yourself within your school's capacity to look after your remedial tail… and then you've got your gifted and talented up the top, that you're supposed to be doing something for… so, who do you keep happy? *(Principal: 1)*

The above account not only creates a continuum of support categories but also stratifies the whole school population in terms of academic and behavioural performance with the construction of "above average" and "gifted and talented" students at the top of the hierarchy.

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Interestingly this principal was one of the very few who mentioned that a student's right to be educated in their local school is enshrined in Commonwealth government legislation (COMLAW 1992; DEST 2006). Still however, there is evidence in this transcript of the slippage between *choice* and *rights*:

> …in terms of all the legislation and human rights stuff – because the Department runs scared …as soon as some kid sues somebody, be it the Department or a private school or whatever, because they couldn't enrol a kid in a wheelchair or with some really severe disability... They may not have a choice. Whether they do it because they have to, legislation-wise, or whether they do it because they want to, I don't know. I mean, of course they'll give you the "Because we want to and because we care!" story – but look at the funding and ask yourself, are they doing it because they want to, or are they setting up all these things that they do have in place because they simply *have* to, because parents are proactive and active and whatever, and legislation and human rights and whatever says that – kids have got certain rights and you've got to get on and do it? *(Principal: 1)*

The tension between "rights" and "choice" is played out in the context of available resources and a perceived "goodness of fit" between the aims and capacity of a school and the characteristics of individual students. A pervasive theme from schools operating in a competitive school market was that the right of a child to attend their local school with their age-peers is commonly perceived as a consequence of political power wielded through policies and legislation that reinforce "parent choice." Importantly, the legislation appears to be viewed as an instrument deriving from the prior mobilisation of that power, not as a mechanism designed to enable justice. The excerpt above also implies that the education system chooses how to interpret the right to education.

Through this process however, the entire concept and "insurrectionary force" of inclusive education becomes reduced to mere integration (Slee 2008), or as one principal expressed it, "…a cheap way of catering for kids who have special needs and don't get the resources that they require" *(Principal: 4)*. While there were some notable exceptions (see Graham & Harwood in press), our research points to the endurance of narrow views as to *what* and *who* the local primary school is for. Overall, the vision and philosophy of inclusive education appears to have had relatively little impact at the level of schooling practice in Australia's largest state. This is particularly evident in metropolitan schools with alternative placement options. Even though some of our participants acknowledged that "kids haven't changed" and that "schools have become more frantic" *(Principal: 10)*, the default position was that primary schools could no longer cope with expectations and therefore, students having difficulty "reaching the bar" had to be supported through resources external to those currently available in the school.

For many principals, the notion of "inclusion" was inextricably tied up with funding, which they saw as diagnosis-dependent and related to individual deficit. There were a number of serious implications that followed this association. Our research found that some schools engage in practices designed to inflate the level of student impairment. For example, parents of a child with additional support needs may be encouraged to seek "the *right* diagnosis" and

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to "tick the highest boxes" in applications for Funding Support in order for their child to be "included". A number of principals discussed the difficulty of getting parents to cooperate in what is sometimes described as "bounty hunting" (Greene & Forster 2002) or "gaming the system" (Figlio & Getzler 2002).

> No, but we have to – sometimes parents, initially – and I can understand it, too – they're in denial, they think "Everything's going OK," or, "It's just a little phase they're going through," but we've actually got to get a diagnosis to qualify for this funding. So yeah, it comes, but sometimes it comes reluctantly. *(Principal: 8)*

> If we feel that a child has a severe mental or health issue and the parents aren't following through by taking that child off to see psychologists, or psychiatrists, or whatever else … our School Counsellors can do what they call a consult, which means that they can actually do the diagnosis, and we can get a disability sign-off for them for twelve months, which means we then can apply for funding… and these are the kids who fall in the behaviours, mostly. *(Principal: 3)*

As discussed earlier, recent research by the first author has found significant increase in the diagnosis of disability in New South Wales government schools (Graham & Sweller, in press), particularly in what Tomlinson (1982) calls "non-normative" categories of disability (emotional disturbance, behaviour disorder and autistic spectrum disorders). When asked about this increase, participating principals nominated difficult behaviour as the chief culprit prompting diagnosis under the umbrella of "mental health." Again however a number of principals reflected on the distance between actual behaviour and how it was perceived. As mentioned earlier in relation to teacher reactions to "ordinary remedial kids," several principals noted how difficult it was to ground teachers who perceived relatively ordinary behaviours as extreme or violent. This variance was reflected to some degree by the principals and again, their views were highly influenced by their current school context, as well as the breadth of their own experience.

For example, in the course of our interviews, each principal was asked "What constitutes behaviour disorder?" Responses varied which was interesting both in and of itself but, contrary to other findings reported in the international research literature (see Avissar, Reiter, & Leyser 2003), we were intrigued to find that principals with extensive experience in other settings (including juvenile justice, special schools, and/or secondary schools) appeared much more balanced and pragmatic about the reasons for and ways of responding to challenging behaviour. These "old warhorses" (as one referred to himself) juxtaposed dominant perceptions within their current school against those in their previous schools; at times, marvelling at the gap between perception and reality.

> A colleague of mine [changed schools] and said, "Oh, geez. These people are up in arms about these boys in Year 6 because they won't wear their hats, they're playing up a bit, and they think their throat's cut!" And he's been in [X school], where children punched him in his office… So he's gone from that to a teacher coming in, stamping

her feet, demanding he do something about these boys! And they've got no idea. *(Principal: 11)*

I'll give you two examples where… I won't name them, but there are a couple of other schools […] where, if you've got an average kid you think there's something wrong with them! Well, there are schools who go through that same process with behaviour. You can be a bit off, but in that setting you look like you're an axe murderer! (laughs) You know, it's relative. *(Principal: 1)*

In relation to funding, two key interrelated points emerged. First, funding for students with a disability was almost exclusively discussed in terms of "hours" not "dollars." Second, the funding was used in almost every case to "buy" time for a teacher's aide with only one principal using the funding in strategic ways to build teacher capacity (see Graham & Harwood, in press). In other cases, when the funding was judged inadequate by the school or the child's needs beyond what the school felt it could manage, parents were strongly encouraged to enrol their child in district support classes or in special schools.

…there was a boy here… his parents had an opportunity of going to the District IM[7] class, and I encouraged that, but they had such an emotional attachment to this school, they didn't want to. I begged them, when [he] was in Year 3, I begged them: could he please go down to [district IM class] and do a bit of catch-up because, as you know, those IM classes are marvellous… If a child's in that environment, they can make great headway, whereas if they're in a class of thirty kids, it's difficult. It's very difficult for the teacher… *(Principal: 8)*

We have regularly had problems with parents having their children placed in Support Unit classes. If a child is assessed … and qualifies, it is parents that confirm the placement rather than the school, so without the parent agreeing to it, those children are left in the mainstream classes. *(Principal: 4)*

When parental agreement with medical diagnosis or alternative placement was not forthcoming, some principals stated that they took matters into their own hands by orchestrating medical diagnosis and, at times, the prescription of stimulant medication.

Our paediatricians here we have a very good relationship with, and this would skew some of the measurements of disability because I know that if I send a child up to one of the paediatricians I will definitely get a diagnosis. I don't care what it is, but if I get one I will then go through the process of seeking additional support for this child.
(Principal: 11)

While in some schools this was done to facilitate greater student access to classroom learning or to support "extreme cases" in a school already struggling to respond to disadvantage, in others diagnosis was used as a means to limit the child's presence in a "model" or "magnet"

school. For example, in one case, the principal entered into a "private negotiation" with the parents, placing a limit on the extent to which their six year old son could be "included:"

> We had a severe behaviour problem last year. We had a little boy in Year 1 who absolutely refused to do what he was told… I had to phone up [father] and say, "Look, I'm sorry. [Son]'s off the air. You'll have to come and pick him up." He got so sick and tired of my phone calls – because there was nothing we could do… that we came to an agreement, that every Tuesday and Thursday, [Son] stayed at home with him, and he only came [to school] Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And the reason for that was that we could only get funding – and that was a severe case of oppositional defiance – we could only get funding for a maximum three days, no matter how bad he was, so that left us in limbo for two days. *(Principal: 8)*

In this one hour interview, a total of four different diagnostic labels were ascribed to this six year old boy: "oppositional defiance", "behaviourally disturbed", "emotionally disturbed" and "Asperger's syndrome." But, when asked for an example of what constituted behaviour disorder, this principal replied, "Well, a behaviour problem at [this school] would be a child who just doesn't do what he's told!" In returning to this six year old boy as an example, the principal contrasted his behaviour against that of the "beautiful kids" in the class.

> So you see that child caused incredible havoc in the school. It's very embarrassing, because here we have the most beautiful Year 1 class – little babies. Beautiful kids. And all of a sudden they're seeing a different rule for this one boy. That's Asperger's. *(Principal: 8)*

The use of positive and negative adjectives when distinguishing children both individually and collectively was indicative of how family circumstances, ethnicity, physical appearance, dis/ability, behaviour and educational labels (such as "remedial") are used in the process of student categorisation. Although administrative categories and medical labels were used extensively and often indiscriminately, the principals also employed more "home-grown" descriptors which had distinctly ableist/racist connotations like "bad," "embarrassing," "special case," "lovely," "blue-eyed," "beautiful," and "Anglo-Saxon." In the example above, the principal's description clearly marks out one boy as an abject interruption in a class of "beautiful babies."

While we acknowledge that this six year old's behaviour may have been difficult to handle, at no time did the principal discuss any attempt by the school to improve teaching capacity nor the requirement that the school make such adjustments as legislated by the *1992 Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) and associated *Disability Standards for Education* (DEST 2006). In this instance, the boy's enrolment and right to an education became contingent upon the number of hours (15) that his Funding Support allocation could pay for a teacher's aide. Even though this child's parents sought to exercise their right to "choose" where their son went to school by refusing to transfer to the district special school (which was over an hours drive from their home), such a "private negotiation" between a principal and a parent effectively circumvents the DDA; unlawfully exempting the school from its legal

obligations. Decisions like this could quite conceivably result in legal action against the NSW Department of Education and Training; however, responses from a number of principals indicated that many perceive the legislative responsibilities as an imposition from the DET rather than a fundamental human right enforced by Federal law (Keeffe 2001).

Although cognisant of the requirements for adjustment at an abstract level, some principals were more inclined to see this as a bureaucratic distraction: "…you've got to demonstrate that you've tried things, and – hey, we all know about 'trying things'. You can set things up to fail, if you know what I mean?" *(Principal: 1)*. The requirements for teaching adjustments, although poorly understood, were a considerable source of tension and, as we described earlier, some principals were aggrieved that the department would "side with parents" because of the potential of being sued.

In relation to the power of the legislative framework however, the first author was told, "Well, actually, the OH&S [NSW Occupational Health and Safety Act] trumps the DDA". Indeed, a very strong perception is that rights of the teacher outweigh the rights of the child. This legislative poker game has far-reaching implications. The reporting of "violent behaviour" has escalated rapidly in NSW government schools over the last decade; while there has been a significant increase in the diagnosis and segregation of students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (Graham & Sweller, in press). Yet, as we report here, there remains considerable distance between real violence and what comes to be reported as violence. This phenomenon is not new and it seems there are deep systemic problems relating not only to the measurement and reporting of student behaviour in NSW (Gonczi & Riordan 2002), but in the wildly divergent perceptions of it, as well as the political and industrial gains that derive from exaggerating it.

Across the interview transcripts there is evidence that points to the pervasiveness of a "silo" vision that paints the NSW Department of Education and Training as a monolithic entity; one that has succeeded in becoming the *raison d'être* for any and all action in New South Wales government schools. This "staring at the sun" view effectively blocks out broader issues of considerable importance for the successful realisation of inclusive schools; for example, consideration of the meaning and purpose of education and how the philosophical basis of a system of education system affects its provision and to whom it is provided, why, where and in what ways. Such issues currently wither in the shadow thrown by this huge, demanding, watchful bureaucracy that has further dominated the educational horizon through the pursuit of an internationally-borrowed "higher standards through assessment/competitive school market" agenda. In such an administrative crucible, the enrolment of and adjustments for students with additional support needs and/or challenging behaviour appear viewed as an imposition, rather than a global human right.

Conclusion

This research found that New South Wales primary school principals' attitudes towards inclusive education and their success in engineering inclusive practices within their school are significantly affected by their own conception of what "inclusion" and "being inclusive" mean, as well as the characteristics of the school community, and the attitudes and capacity of staff. In the interviews, principals themselves recognise the centrality of their role in establishing a school-wide understanding of inclusive education that is relevant to the characteristics and needs of their students. At the same time, they report on the factors that

influence, shape and, in some cases, restrict their agency in promoting that understanding. However, the interplay between the contextual and the situated, between the vision and the "pragmatics," and between perceived, real, educational and administrative definitions of "need," results in many variations of what "inclusion" is.

While the insights that we heard from our participants highlight both barriers and ways to facilitate inclusive practice at the school level, our concern here is to what extent the multiplicity of "inclusions" identified in their accounts hinder the effort to realise the development of inclusive education across the entire system. This proliferation of meanings has been noted elsewhere (Graham & Slee, 2008), however, it is clear from our data that "inclusion" and "integration" now mean the same thing in New South Wales government schools.[8] There also appears to be little recognition of what these terms really mean or what the originating philosophies set out to achieve and why, in the case of integration, the theoretical construct was challenged by critical theorists, disability activists and parents and students. In that context, inclusive education has little scope to challenge normalised assumptions at the community and individual level and "inclusion" becomes more about managing or normalising difference. Consequently, there remains a significant gap between the vision and reality in New South Wales government schools.

To draw again on the work of Michael Fullan (2006), this indicates problems in leadership at the system level. Inclusion is a policy issue that should not be open to interpretation or subject to the will or tenacity of individual principals. Indeed, we would argue that the many different understandings and discourses of "inclusion" that co-exist at the level of policy and between parallel organisational structures in effect work to sustain the gap between the vision of inclusive education and the reality that we find in some schools. Ultimately, the myriad perceptions of what "inclusion" means, and who it is for, stitch incomplete mandates for change. The result leaves gaping holes between theory, policy and schooling practice through which our most vulnerable students fall. But because our language no longer means anything and "integration" now passes for "inclusion," there appears little incentive to examine our practice and nothing tangible for which to strive.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1. Putting Inclusion into Context: socioeconomic status of communities

Participating Schools		As mapped against Tony Vinson's (2007) social geography of Australia
5 schools were described as "low SES"	4 of these were Priority Schools (eligible for $50,000pa additional funding on the basis of SES disadvantage)	Significantly Disadvantaged
	2 of these received further funding through Priority Action Schools (PAS) and Schools in Partnership (SiP) with Aboriginal Communities	Degree of Disadvantage
2 described as "low to middle" and another 2 as "middle" SES		Middle Grade
2 as "middle/high" SES		Degree of Advantage
2 ranked as "affluent" or "high SES"		Advantage

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Figure 2: Putting Inclusion into Context: cultural diversity of communities

Cultural Diversity in Participating Schools	New South Wales State average = 35% pop. overseas-born, 20% of these are Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE)	
4 described as "very diverse"		>60% of Student population LBOTE
3 identified as "diverse"		Approx. 40-59% LBOTE
2 approx. NSW state average		Approx. 20-30% LBOTE
4 described as "mainly Anglo"		<10% NESB or LBOTE
5 schools catered for New Arrivals (refugee status)	9 schools had students identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, and Pacific Islander	

(Source: NSWDSRD, 2009)

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Notes:

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[1] Primary (or elementary) schools in New South Wales typically encompass Kindergarten to Year 6. Principals can be known in other jurisdictions internationally as 'head teachers' or 'school administrators.'

[2] These units are distributed throughout regions and students are allocated on a district basis which is wider than the adjoining school's catchment area.

[3] Graham and Sweller (in press) found that the percentage of students with a confirmed diagnosis of disability eligible for support in New South Wales government schools has increased from 2.7 to 6.7% between 1997 and 2007. Their analysis shows significant increase in the identification and segregation of students with social, emotional and behavioural disorders; particularly in the secondary years.

[4] Before data collection commenced, HREC approval was obtained via the University of Sydney Ethics in Human Research process and permission to conduct research in government schools was sought via the State Educational Research Approval Process (SERAP) process.

[5] All interviews took place in the schools which allowed the researchers to get a sense of the physical environment and organisation of the schools, as well as their local communities. Pseudonyms have been used to disguise the identity of participants, schools and communities. Any specific details that might identify the schools have been omitted.

[6] Funding Support (FS) is a categorical funding system that apportions individually determined funding from the NSW DET for students with a confirmed disability, which is over and above the support mechanisms available in schools. Categories of disability eligible for support under FS include: Physical Disability, Hearing Disability, Vision Disability, Intellectual Impairment and Psychological Disability (encompassing Autism Spectrum Disorders, emotional disturbance and severe behaviour disorder).

[7] The term "IM" is often used as shorthand in New South Wales government schools to refer to the disability classification "mild intellectual impairment".

[8] The distinction we would make between integration and inclusive education is in the primary locus of intervention: integration concentrates on remediating or changing the child to fit an already existing and secure system, whereas inclusive education focuses on changing practice and other structural elements of the schooling system. This distinction has been noted before in an analysis of the discourses of inclusive education and the appropriation of the term "inclusion." As Graham and Slee (2008) have argued, the term "inclusion" reinforces a normative centre by implying a "bringing in" from the margins.

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