Principals' perspectives of inclusive education involving students with autism spectrum conditions – a Swedish case study

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this case study is to describe what commitment and actions are needed in the Swedish school so that principals — within the Swedish school policy framework and with the goal of creating an inclusive school culture and practice — can positively affect schooling for students with disabilities, with a particular focus on students with autism spectrum conditions (ASC). Three research questions guide the study: (1) What commitment and actions do principals consider important for developing an inclusive school for all students, with a particular focus on students with ASC? (2) How do the principals reflect on their own leadership in the development of inclusive education, with a particular focus on students with ASC? (3) Based on the results, what are the implications of the study in practice?

Design/methodology/approach – As part of a three-step data collection method, a snowball sampling was conducted in which $n = 6$ principals were initially interviewed and the data analyzed by an inductive thematic content analysis.

Findings – (1) Certain structures are needed when planning how to develop mutual values when organizing an inclusive school involving students with ASC, (2) the principals could, at times, feel a sense of loneliness in relation to their superiors and decision-makers and (3) more accountability from educators and greater consideration for the student perspective in decision-making are needed.

Practical implications – It was found that (1) certain structures are needed when planning how to develop mutual values when organizing an inclusive school involving students with ASC, (2) the principals could, at times, feel a sense of isolation in relation to their superiors and decision-makers and (3) more accountability from educators and greater consideration for the student perspective in decision-making are needed.

Originality/value – Index for inclusion and elements from the inclusive leadership model were used in the data collection and analysis.

Keywords Autism spectrum, Case studies, Inclusive education, Inclusive school leadership, Index for inclusion, Principals

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Inclusive education is often discussed as involving the attitudes and classroom techniques that meet the diversity of the educational culture, practice and policy (Ainscow and Booth, 2002). In addition, according to Humpfry and Symes (2014), inclusive education requires all staff to have a clear and shared understanding of what inclusion involves, matched with shared expectations of inclusion that must be supported by the school leadership (Horrocks *et al.*, 2008). Angelides (2011) explains that being a leader in inclusive education requires understanding the local context and the students' perspective and, accordingly, designing strategies in the leadership that support the teaching by considering the children's voices. Dotger and Coughlin (2018) analyzed the actions and decisions that school leaders made regarding students with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) and noted a prevailing culture and structure that often excludes students with disabilities when circumstances in the classroom became difficult. This action reflects well-intentioned but ultimately negative consequences for the student with ASC. Therefore, school leaders' skills and knowledge in special education are crucial and must permeate all decision-making (Dotger and Coughlin, 2018).

This article concerns school leadership, with a particular focus on leadership involving the inclusion of students with ASC; accordingly, six Swedish principals were interviewed to gain insight into their perspectives and how they initiate their practices. The aim of this case study is to describe what commitment and actions are needed in the Swedish school so that principals — within the Swedish school policy framework and with the intention of creating an inclusive school culture and practice — can positively affect schooling for students with disabilities, with a particular focus on students with ASC. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What commitment and actions do principals consider important for developing an inclusive school for all students, with a particular focus on students with ASC?

RQ2. How do the principals reflect on their own leadership in the development of inclusive education, with a particular focus on students with ASC?

RQ3. Based on the results, what are the implications of the study in practice?

Students with ASC in inclusive education in Sweden

Neurodevelopmental conditions (NDC) – for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD), Tourette syndrome and ASC – are characterized by atypical and norm-breaking behavior, social communication and interaction ability, among others (Järbrink, 2007; Knapp *et al.*, 2009; Hirvikoski *et al.*, 2016). This can be a challenge when students with ASC are confronted with a school culture founded on social norms, also referred to as *collective representations of acceptable group behavior* (Lapinski and Rimal, 2005). Anderson (2020) describes how students with ASC in Sweden have traditionally been placed in special schools for students with intellectual disability (ID) or been subject to customized solutions and special school units due to their reduced ability to understand the social context of school compared to the other students. The anxiety caused by the excessive sensory stimulation of school also contributes to the ASC student's reduced ability to learn and adapt socially in mainstream schools. Several directives and policies in Sweden (Education Act, SOU, 2010, p. 800) have specified that only students with diagnosed ID can be placed in special schools for students with ID. According to Anderson (2020), the result is that a considerable number of students with ASC without ID are expected to complete schooling in mainstream primary and secondary schools under the same conditions as students without ASC. This puts extraordinary pressure on students with ASC, which Anderson (2020) explains has been reported to create certain difficulties. According to the Swedish Regular Compulsory School Ordinance, support intended for students in need of special support must "in the first instance

be provided within the class or group to which the pupil belongs. If there are special reasons, such support may instead be provided in a special group" (Public Law 1194, 1994; chap. 5, §5). In addition, the Swedish Curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare (2011, revised 2018) states that

> equivalent education does not mean that the education should be the same everywhere or that the resources of the school are to be allocated equally. Account should be taken of the varying circumstances and needs of pupils. There are also different ways of attaining these goals. The school has a special responsibility for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set up for the education. For this reason, education can never be the same for all. (p. 6)

The principal is ultimately responsible for distributing resources within the unit (SOU, 2010, p. 1,303, Swedish Education Act). However, Johansson-Hidén and Blossing (2011) describe the dilemmas of today's Swedish principals as involving days filled with result-oriented questions about school policies and economic issues, with the consequence that quality and development often come second.

Leadership in inclusive education
Research (Kugelmass, 2003; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004) suggests that the role of school leaders is central in successfully shaping inclusive education. Irvine *et al.* (2011) highlight how principals in rural Canada express inclusion, as in a place definition of the inclusion concept, as a normal component of the area's educational system. This may be related to how many small communities have no alternative than to include students with exceptional needs in the general education classroom, but this was expressed as positive by the principals in the study.

Some studies (Cambron-McCabe, 2006; Marshall and Oliva, 2006) have proposed that one way to develop inclusive education in schools is through the creation of leaders who promote social justice and inclusion. According to Aarons *et al.* (2014) and later Aarons *et al.* (2017), effective leadership is seen as a necessary factor in supporting the successful implementation of evidence-based practice, which Standick *et al.* (2019) explore in their study of how principals led schools that implemented evidence-based practice for students with ASC. Their findings suggest that leadership actions that reflect the optimal leadership profile demonstrate moral and ethical integrity and inspire others. Angelides (2011) emphasizes the need for transformational *leadership*, in which the principals influence and change the culture of their school and places this within the context of transformational models of leadership (Bass, 1999). This is characterized by inclusivity and teacher participation, which promote *distributed leadership* – a form of power distribution in schools that extends the authority and influence of groups or individuals (Arrowsmith, 2007). In relation to students with ASC, Schechter and Feldman (2019) investigated the role of the principal in creating professional learning environments (PLCs) in special education. They identify how PLCs in research are defined as a "network or network of learning processes that arises among its members" (Schechter and Feldman, 2019, p. 17) and further explain that special education school principals must often foster learning communities as a means for meeting policies regarding the education of students with special needs (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; Schechter and Feldman, 2019). The principal plays a key role in allowing the time and space for staff members to collaborate with each other, explains Schechter and Feldman (2019). In the work of developing PLCs, perhaps distributed leadership should be seen as an important factor. In the present study, two models were used in the analysis of the data. In the inclusive leadership model (Oskarsdottir *et al.*, 2020), which is described in more detail in the next section, elements from the distributed leadership, such as staff participation in decision-making, the transformational leadership (changing and developing the school culture) and the implementation of *instructional leadership*, are seen as key components for successful

inclusive leadership. The elements in the instructional leadership are the focus on having clear educational goals, planning the curriculum and highlighting the leaders' responsibility to advocate for better measurable outcomes for students, in addition to the importance of enhancing the quality of classroom teaching (Day *et al.*, 2016).

Two models used in the data collection and in the analysis process
To examine how principals can create a more inclusive environment in their schools, two models were chosen as analytical tools: the index for inclusion and elements from the model for inclusive leadership. The first, the index for inclusion, was paired with three key concepts identified in the model for inclusive leadership (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015; Óskarsdottir *et al.*, 2020). Ainscow *et al.* (2006) explain how, according to this index of inclusion, the concept of inclusion can be summarized in three overlapping ways: as inclusion that reduces barriers to learning and increases the participation of all students, as inclusion that increases the capacity of schools to respond to the diversity of students in their local communities in ways that treat them all equally and as inclusion that involves the integration of inclusive values into action in education and society, as shown in Figure 1.

Ainscow (1999) explains that inclusive education focuses on overcoming the barriers that prevent the participation and learning of all students, regardless of ability level, gender, social background or attendance record. In addition, Ainscow *et al.* (2004) claim that actions to advance inclusive education have focused more on the ideological aspects of inclusion rather than taking a whole-school approach or directing change at the systems level. The index for inclusion highlights the need for evolving inclusive practices, creating school cultures and designing inclusive policies aimed at enhancing a more inclusive approach in school and society (Ainscow and Booth, 2002).

In the second model – the model for inclusive leadership mentioned earlier – Óskarsdottir *et al.* (2020) point out three key concepts in the successful inclusive leadership: *access*, *autonomy* and *accountability*. These concepts are necessary for principals to fulfill their core functions and facilitate more inclusive school practices; however, they must be supported by applicable national policies that ensure principals' *access* to appropriate pay and status in the community in addition to ongoing support commensurate on all levels. The policies should provide access to professional development and ongoing support and resources to develop the capacity of the workforce to understand diversity issues and implement national policy initiatives. Principals must also have the *autonomy* to make evidence-based decisions about the school's strategic direction, development and organization as well as the autonomy to appoint staff who take responsibility for and raise the achievement levels of all learners.
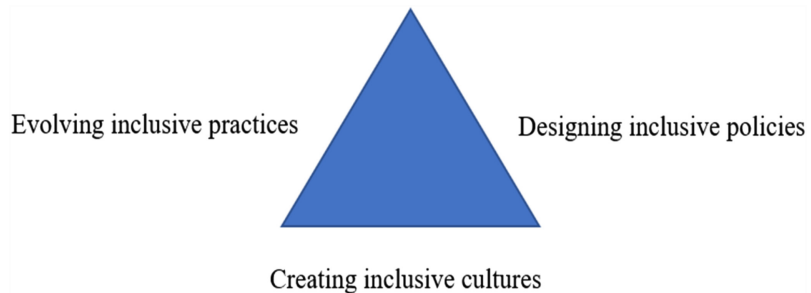

Figure 1.
The index for inclusion

Source(s): Ainscow and Booth (2002)

Within the *accountability* factor, national policies must ensure that principals are able to set out the vision, values and outcomes for which they (and other stakeholders) wish to be held to account (e.g. equity, nondiscrimination, meeting the requirements of all learners) to learners, families, the local community and others through mechanisms aligned with other policy areas to facilitate support for inclusive education policy and practice. This accountability is particularly pertinent because, along with important stakeholders, principals have a leading role in monitoring, self-reviewing, evaluating, communicating (student results) and reflecting on data to work continuously for improvement (Óskarsdottir *et al.*, 2020). In this study, the index for inclusion and the three key concepts in the inclusive leadership model were used as tools in the analysis process and in the organization/presentation of the findings.

Method and respondents

In this case study, the data were collected over a period of one year and divided into three parts. This research design enabled us to gain detailed insight into critical events, the principals' challenges and actions taken to address threats in the school context (Yin, 2014) in relation to students with ASC. In the first part, $n = 6$ Swedish principals were interviewed. In the second part, $n = 3$ agreed to give a second interview, and later, $n = 2$ participated in a third, written interview. The second and third interviews were added to supplement the study with a more in-depth discussion from the participants about the inclusion concept in general in relation to the principals' own leadership and theories of inclusive education.

First part of the data collection

In this study, a purposeful sampling was performed first. Thereafter, based on the first participants, the last participants were recruited by snowball sampling. A purposeful sampling involves the deliberate choosing of a participant due to certain characteristics of that participant, explains Etikan *et al.* (2016). This involves identifying individuals or groups of individuals who are skilled and well-informed about the topic of interest. In addition to knowledge, experience and being willing and able to participate, they also possess the ability to communicate experiences and opinions. Purposeful sampling involves certain limitations compared to a random sample of participants. In this sense, the researcher is subjective and biased in the choice of subjects in the study. This hinders the researcher's ability to draw conclusions about a population, and therefore only general conclusions and implications to the practice can be made. In a snowball sampling, the researcher asks the first few respondents, usually selected via convenience sampling, if they know of anyone with similar views or experiences who could take part in the research (Polit-O'Hara and Beck, 2006). Two of the participating principals were already known to the researchers and were selected based on purposeful sampling. The four other participating principals were chosen based on a snowball choice built on information from two of the principals who were first interviewed and from a principal who declined participation. The first six interviews were performed on site ($n = 4$) and via the video conference tool, Zoom ($n = 2$).

Selection of respondents in the first part of the data collection

Three of the respondents lead compulsory schools and/or compulsory school for students with intellectual disability (CSSIDs) for students between the ages of 13 and 17 and, in one case, between 6 and 12. The remaining respondents lead school organizations in upper-secondary school and/or upper-secondary school for students with intellectual disability (USSIDs) between the ages of 16 and 21. The respondents and their school level/type of school are shown in Table 1. This table also gives information about the various types of schools in

Respondent	School years	School level/type	School organization
P1	Preschool class to Grade 6	Compulsory school	Mainstream school setting, including students with ASC
P2	Preschool class to Grade 9	Compulsory school	Mainstream school setting, including students with ASC
P3	Preschool class to Grade 9	Compulsory school and school for CSSIDs	Inclusive school setting (TDs and CSSIDs in the same classes), students with ASC, including those with and without ID
P4	Grades 10 to 12	Upper-secondary school	Mainstream school setting, including students with ASC
P5	Grades 10 to 12	Upper-secondary school and special group for USSIDs	Two special groups in the arts program: one group with students with ASC (without ID) and one group with USSIDs (including students with ASC and ID)
P6	Grades 10 to 12	USSIDs	USSIDs (ASC with ID)

Note(s): CSSIDs = compulsory school for students with intellectual disabilities
USSIDs = upper-secondary school for students with intellectual disabilities
TD = typically developed
ID = intellectual disability

Table 1.
Overview of the respondents and their school organizations

Sweden, such as schools for typically developed (TD) students and students with disabilities, and special school units for students with ID.

The first interview
Unstructured, in-depth individual interviews (Creswell, 2012) were conducted to gain insight into the principals' personal values on the practice of inclusive leadership and the challenges they encounter in their work. The interviews were recorded on digital audio devices and transcribed verbatim. As each interview in the first part of the data collection lasted for one hour, the transcripts provided rich data for further analysis. The first interview involved questions about planning for, including and educating students with ASC as well as any other students who may display challenging behavior at school. These questions covered topics about the school's culture and values; accessibility and participation for students with ASC in school; the development of more universally designed curricula, instruction and assessment; collaborative learning; meeting the students' needs; and strengthening the school's community connections.

Second and third parts of the data collection
In the second part of the data collection, three principals declined to continue participating, but the three remaining principals agreed to take part in a second interview. The three remaining principals work in similar school forms (Swedish upper-secondary school). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were performed via Zoom with the aim to use a virtual meeting platform with which the staff felt the most comfortable (Hill *et al.*, 2021). The second and third parts of the data collection consist of three oral interviews and two written interviews, described in Figure 2.

In the second and third interviews, the principals were asked to reflect more on their role and actions as leaders in relation to inclusive education, particularly education involving students with ASC. A written interview was sent to the two remaining principals who agreed to participate. According to Scheik (2014), a written interview can be defined as a written text production created by the researcher, which the respondent performs in the researcher's

absence and in a delayed communication, as text productions like this are considered more as everyday, reflective writing processes. Writing, according to Goody and Watt (1963), promotes "private or individual thinking" which

> Enables the individual to objectify his own experience and gives him some check upon the transmutations of memory under the influences of subsequent events. (p. 339)

Analysis process
The data in this study were analyzed by a thematic analysis, which provides flexibility both in terms of theory and in forming research questions, the sample size/composition, the data collection method and methods for generating meaning. According to Clark and Brown (2017), thematic analysis is used to

> Identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices; "experiential" research which seeks to understand what participants' think, feel, and do. (p. 297)

Another approach adopted for this study is Thorne's (2016) *interpretative description* inductive qualitative method; however, it does not aim to offer practical results for the practice. This method entails a qualitative researcher cataloging the preliminary coding notes and looking for patterns or themes, Thorne (2016) explains, with the result that

> The construction of these themes remains tentative as the analytic process continues. This allows researchers to modify or restructure them as they develop, and they can be redefined at higher or lower levels. Coding is primarily used not to predetermine meaning, but to allow for segments about an identified topic to be assembled in one place to complete the interpretative process. (p. 5)

As described by Braun and Clark (2006), in this process, the following steps are to be taken: 1) familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes and 6) producing the report. In the first step, the interviews were transcribed, and while reading the interviews multiple times, the second and third steps were taken. These steps involved creating initial codes and searching for themes. Based on the data material, two major themes with subthemes crystallized. These themes will be more specifically introduced in the Results section along with the results in relation to the index of inclusion model (Ainscow and Booth, 2002). At the end of the Results section, the results are presented in relation to the three concepts identified in an inclusive leadership model: *access*, *accountability* and *autonomy* (Óskarsdottir *et al.*, 2020).

Results
According to the principals in this study, what levels of commitment and actions are necessary to develop an inclusive school involving all students, particularly those with ASC?

Respondents in the second interview (oral)

Focus on the respondents' own leadership and their actions in leading a school, which, according to Swedish national policy, is assumed to include all students, but in this case, with a special focus on the students with ASC.

| P4 |
| P5 |
| P6 |

Respondents in the third interview (written)

Reflections over their own actions and leadership in relation to the concepts in the inclusive leadership model (European Agency 2018; Oskarsdottir et al., 2020): access, autonomy, and accountability.

| P4 |
| P6 |

Figure 2.
Participants in the second and third parts of the data collection

The main themes with subthemes in the overall results from the three data collection parts are as follows:

First main theme: developing shared values

The school culture: The principals experience a general acceptance of diversity among their staff. In general, all six respondents highly praise their school's culture, describing it as supportive, caring and without prestige. "Here, all children are everyone's children," one expresses. The principals view inclusion as involving the students' individual sense of participation in school. Regarding creating inclusive cultures, participation in the school must be ASC-adapted, and it is important for the adults in the school to have access to the ASC students' thoughts and ideas. "Students with ASC are different, just like everyone else," one says. Organizing for diversity and having a high level of knowledge about ASC is important in terms of different needs and the teaching techniques that meet these needs. Adults in school must work professionally in all situations and not end up locked in their own personal conflicts. One of the principals explains how "understanding an ASC student's needs also involves understanding how to use the relationship as a pedagogical tool to help the student."

Authenticity and clear communication: This steers the development work. "It is important for a leader to be authentic and communicate clearly," one of the principals say. The principals face various dilemmas when trying to meet the needs of students with ASC in school, which they claim are the results of limited budgets and the requirements of policies that collide when juggling, for instance, both the students' right to support and the staff's right to a good working environment. The principals in this study explain that they often feel as though they are fighting for their students, especially when facing the decision-makers higher up in the educational hierarchy. Here, they articulate a sense of loneliness and exposure in relation to their superiors.

Prosperity and sustainability: High staff turnover in the Swedish school is a systemic difficulty. To prevent this, the staff must prosper – if the staff are comfortable, the students will also be. A central part of a principal's task is to create a healthy *we*-feeling in the school. Regarding evolving inclusive practices, one principal explains: "a pitfall can be when principals ally themselves too much with the staff, as there is a risk that exclusive tendencies may arise." Creating meaning and guidance for accessibility, knowledge of ASC and what the needs within ASC have for the teaching is a basis for the school to function. These requisites should not be considered special or extra but rather part of high-quality teaching. The same principal continues "I am constantly working to convince the decision-makers that the school practice needs this competence."

Visionary leadership: This is important for developing an inclusive practice. It sets an example that influences the staff and surrounding community. However, effective visionary leadership can be challenging due to lack of time.

The society: Cooperation with the surrounding community is a key factor in creating mutual understanding and shared values. "Invite the community into the school and the school reaching out to the community," one of the principals say.

Second main theme: developing structures

Flexibility: Regarding flexibility in an organized form, it is important to have structures and routines to follow-up on the students' social situations, behavioral development and academic achievements to make flexible adaptions. "The organizational structures must be flexible and not static in the meeting with the individual student," one of the principals summarizes.

Professional development: Certain structures are required when implementing various plans and policies for equal treatment of the students. This can be organized on a practical level, for instance, in the classroom during the start and end of each school day and lesson.

These structures also strengthen the teacher's leadership skills. The experience of teaching and interacting with one student group in the meeting of a new group of students can be used in an advantageous way – rotating the staff allows them to experience teaching a diverse range of students and helps develop the skills needed to make adaptions on a group level. To teach for diversity in school, the ability to differentiate the teaching is a requisite for success. Differentiation is not the same as individualizing and having an individual lesson plan for each student, but rather it is about flexibility in the execution of the teaching. A challenge with inclusive education is to plan and execute the education despite a wide range of abilities in the same classroom. However, "students in this environment develop social skills and mutual respect of others through interacting with those who are different from themselves." Continuous education for the staff to increase the understanding of disability is seen as crucial by the principals.

Documentation: A metaphor of handrails is used when describing the development of structures in an organization and documenting the use of them (as one would use handrails) in decision-making processes.

Cooperation: To restore the ASC student's (or a student with earlier school failure's) affiliation with, and trust in, the school, working together with other stakeholders and professions creates relationships. Cooperation also in the sense that the school staff work close together with each other, in planning, organizing and in the execution of the teaching. In addition, the principals highlight the importance of cooperating with the parents and surrounding community.

How do the principals in this study reflect on their own leadership in relation to the development of inclusive education, particularly regarding students with ASC?

In this section, the results are introduced by a disposition that uses the key concept from the inclusive leadership model (European Agency, 2018; Oskarsdottir *et al.*, 2020) of *access*, *autonomy* and *accountability* for answering the second research question.

Access

Principals' access to policy: A principal's responsibility is to create a school that works for all students and falls in line with the governing documents. Here, the decision-maker's responsibility is to fully understand that, to improve the possibilities for good results, the governing documents must be followed in terms of accessibility. Only then will politicians see the outcome that they want in the form of increased results for all students. Limited budgets present problems in achieving this. Regarding policy that gives access to appropriate pay and status in the community as a principal as well as ongoing support commensurate with levels of autonomy, the principals address how they have good salaries and status but lack support from senior executives and politicians. Much time is spent fighting on behalf of the students and what is in their best interest. The onus is on the individual principal to work on creating good relationships at different levels. A generally limited budget can prevent access to professional development and ongoing support and resources to develop the capacity of the workforce for diversity and implement national policy initiatives. There is commitment conflict in this but also a feeling of violating the Education Act when it comes to students with ASC's right to support, as the budget often goes before these students' needs. The principals in this study generally understand their responsibility for all the students, the staff and the surrounding community. However, tight budgets create obstacles, which sometimes makes them feel a sense of failure.

Principals' ability to develop visionary leadership: The principals describe their role as one which facilitates the staff to improve their ability to teach for diversity. One of the principals emphasizes the importance of the teachers' relational competence to succeed with this, stating that "a principal, being the educational leader, must take the time to be in the classrooms and continuously discuss the education with the staff."

Principal's access to perform a sustainable leadership: Principals are responsible for the different development processes they start. "Principals need to stay and give time," one of the principals says.

Autonomy

Principals' autonomy in decision-making: Regarding to policies that are intended to facilitate principals to make evidence-based decisions about the school's strategic direction, development and organization, the principals in this study express a great deal of freedom if the budget is kept. They also have a great deal of freedom based on policy. "This is a freedom that must be exercised!" one principal exclaims. From the school's point of view, principals are quite free to organize the work of providing support for all learners without recourse to labeling or bureaucratic processes. The principals experience that when obstacles and limitations occur, they usually lie with the other stakeholders due to their difficulties in having time to collaborate.

Principals' autonomy in leadership: In a general sense, the principals see their key role as changemakers who enhance the school culture and develop it toward a shared vision of inclusion that meets all the needs of the students. It is the principal's duty to facilitate time and structures for the adults in school to create and develop good relationships with students and colleagues and perform a visionary and sustainable leadership.

Accountability

Principals' responsibilities for different actors: Regarding national policies that the principal is held accountable to learners, families, the local community and others through mechanisms that are aligned with other policy areas to ensure support for inclusive education policy and practice, the principals refer to their job as a mission rather than a job. It can be a challenge because certain laws give different and double responsibilities, such as the Education Act and the Work Environment Act — staff may see certain students in need of support as a work environment problem, while, at the same time, the student is entitled to support. "Change takes time," one of the principals reflects. The school is "reborn" every school year and therefore is not a static culture but rather a flexible one. Another principal states that "the principal has the ultimate responsibility to give the adults in school the best possible conditions for students with ASC to succeed in school," meaning that, in a long-term perspective, the school's mission is to prepare students for life after school. When coming to the interpretation of the concept of inclusion, the student's perspective must take precedence over other perspectives, as this gives the students a sense of participation. One of the principals explains how "exclusion appears when teachers are left alone with dilemmas."

Accountability when taking the lead: Regarding the principals to have accountability in playing a leading role in monitoring, self-reviewing and evaluating, together with key stakeholders, to provide information on learner outcomes and reflect on data to inform ongoing improvement, this accountability is seen as important and usually works through the systematic quality management, which, according to Swedish policy, the principal is required to do.

Shift in responsibility: The principal stands in the front line of difficult decisions. If there are organizational changes, the principals must take center stage and announce these. One of the principals summarizes this by explaining that "the farther one comes from the front line in the decision-making chain, the easier it is for one to make difficult decisions that can affect students, teachers, and parents."

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that tight budgets and demands for goal-driven results may risk a reduction in principals' commitment to work toward including all students. The difference between the schools and the school organizations the principals lead also reveals

something about the complexity of addressing inclusive education simply as a matter of a student's placement. In the introduction of this article, Ainscow and Booth (2002) note thatinclusive education is about attitudes and classroom techniques to meet diversity. This calls for more knowledge about how to differentiate the education among the teachers to meet all students, which is also an aspect that reoccurred in the results. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) describe *differentiated instruction* (DI) as teachers reacting responsively to the student's needs, meaning that differentiation is simply attending to the learning needs of a particular student or small group of students rather than the more usual method of teaching the class as though all the individuals are basically alike. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is often mentioned in conjunction with DI, and while these models are not the same, both are rooted in the belief that variability exists in any group of students, but this variation is seen as beneficial for all the students' learning (Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson and Allan, 2000; Ainscow and Booth, 2002).

Further, the results in this article indicate the meaning of values and structures as important for an inclusive leadership. They also highlight how, in addition to professional development in ASC and teaching techniques in meeting these students, collaboration among the staff and the surrounding society is needed. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) examine how the leadership role includes making plans to ensure that abstract visions for change become concrete. In line with this, the present study shows how the principals oversee budgets, schedules, access to materials and knowledge and organize other resources necessary for change. In addition, Tomlinson and Allan (2000) explain how the principals work with teachers and administrators to determine their needs related to change processes. The principals respond in an effective and efficient manner, continuously formally assessing both the process of change and its outcomes.

Accountability is a recurring theme in these interviews. Lack of accountability, or the shift in responsibility by the adults within the school system, can hinder the success of student learning. The results suggest that school staff share this responsibility at all levels — inside the school organization, at the policy level and within the surrounding community. The policies are meant to guide the adults in decision-making, both academically and in fostering future responsible adults into an inclusive society. However, if these policies are not accessible enough, without an accessible design and created for the diversity of the individuals who are meant to read and interpret them, this creates barriers. Adults working in schools can also inadvertently create barriers in their demeanor toward students, for instance, in what they say and how they say it, how they offer students access to information and the ways in which the students are allowed to express their knowledge. Adults also inadvertently create barriers to students' learning by the rules they set up and the structures they shape in the classroom. In addition to the student perspective, to enhance the adults' ability to see the possible barriers that they may create for students' learning or participation, the adults need the eyes of their colleagues — others' observations of their practice beyond solely their own. But how can the adults be held more accountable? The results of this case study suggest that this involves the conditions surrounding the adults' work with students. In this work, it is proposed that the principal's role, approach, ability and knowledge are important. In the chain of command, having knowledge of disabilities, demonstrating an awareness of diversity and showing trust and respect are essential for outcomes that are in the students' best interest.

According to Dotger and Coughlin (2018), leading an inclusive organization with a focus on inclusive education evidently requires good knowledge of special education in addition to the ability to listen and demonstrate a high ethical pathos with authentic, visionary and sustainable leadership. A school leader with these attributes may serve to strengthen the coworkers' sense of accountability and responsibility toward their students. Nevertheless, to include the student perspective –as highlighted in the results of this study – and to succeed in inclusive leadership, a leader should value the notion that "all children are everyone's children."

Conclusions and implications

The principals describe the concept of inclusion as the students' own sense of participation in school, with the implication that it is important to consider the student perspective in decision-making processes. The principals articulate a sense of loneliness and vulnerability in relation to their superiors, to the extent that they feel they must fight certain battles on behalf of their students when faced with the decision-makers higher up in the educational hierarchy. This shows the importance of highlighting the organizational processes and decision-making procedures that exist in the control system to find any pitfalls that can make it difficult for principals to make well-balanced decisions. In general, the principals in this study see their key role as changemakers who initiate processes that enhance the school culture in their organizations toward a shared vision of inclusion, thus developing a school for all students. This may be a key factor for successful inclusive leadership. However, the lack of accountability, or the shift in responsibility by the adults within the school system, is seen in this study as a hinderance to the success of the ASC students' learning. The results of this case study support previous research emphasizing the importance of common values and solid structures in the implementation of inclusive education involving students with ASC.

Limitations and future research

One limitation is that the current study was conducted on a relatively small scale, which means that the results are not directly transferable. Nevertheless, it provides a snapshot of the complexity of inclusive education in relation to a certain group of students who risk facing certain challenges involving inclusion. The study's contribution can be considered as relevant for the school practice of principals and researchers, for instance, by considering the use of the index for inclusion (Ainscow and Booth, 2002) and key concepts in the inclusive leadership model (Óskarsdottir *et al.*, 2020) as tools in the analysis processes and school development work. Another limitation involves the difference in the sizes of the schools and the difference in the types of schools where the participating principals work. In addition, the three phases of the study consisted of a varying and ever-smaller number of participants, which further limited the ability to generalize the results. Although this study's initial focus was on students with ASC, it should be noted that the views of the principals generally reflect the perspective of leading an inclusive school geared at meeting all disability categories rather than one specific type of disability. School leaders are, according to the Swedish school policies, required to design a school that meets all students' needs, but this generalization by the principals in this study may also have to do with relying on models that focus on inclusive education in general in the interviews. This is a limitation in the present study, as the aim was to target inclusive school leadership in relation to students with ASC. The principals' general perception regarding this may be related to their concerns about the risks that students' difficulties will be objectified rather than be a matter of their actual participation and success in school. Future research can add to the body of knowledge by including student perspectives about inclusive school leadership and how students can be more involved in decision-making processes, including problematizing the prevailing perspectives of inclusive education.

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