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School Principals' Understandings of Student Difference and Diversity and How it Influences Their Work

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Abstract

Purpose: This article explores how Ontario principals make sense of difference within student populations *and* how this sensemaking influences how they do their work.

Design/methodology/approach: The article reports on a qualitative study in Ontario, Canada that included 59 semistructured interviews with school principals from English Public, secular school districts in Southern Ontario.

Findings: Four themes emerged in principals' descriptions of student populations: (a) perceiving everyone as the same, or homogeneous; (b) perceiving visible differences associated with particular religions, race, and cultures; (c) perceiving invisible or less visible differences, such as academic differences, socioeconomic status, mental health issues, gender identity, and sexual orientation; and (d) perceiving both visible and less visible differences through an inclusive lens. When asked about how their understanding of difference influenced how they did their work, principals' responses varied from not influencing their work at all to influencing practices and activities. Participants' context—both personal and local—influenced some of the work they did in their role as school principal. Lastly, multiple sources of disconnect emerged between how

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principals understood difference and the practices that they engage in at their school site;

between their sensemaking about difference and diversity and preparing students for 21st century

competencies as global citizens; and between principals' understanding of difference and

diversity and existing provincial policy.

Originality/value: Although other articles have examined how principals make sense of

difference and diversity in student bodies, this article also explores how this sensemaking

influences how school leaders do their work.

Classification: Research Paper

Keywords: School leadership; diversity; inclusive leadership; principals; sensemaking

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Principals are uniquely positioned to either promote or undermine equity in their schools. Their role in creating equitable schools is especially important in Ontario, Canada, as student populations are becoming more diverse along cultural, linguistic, and religious lines, in addition to race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic status (Berger *et al.*, 2009; Dei and James, 2002; Goddard and Hart, 2007; Government of Ontario, 2016; Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016). Even though, overall, Ontario is recognized as having a successful public school system (Barber *et al.*, 2010), not all groups of students are experiencing the same degree of success in schools. The provincial government has implemented numerous programs, policies, and approaches with the aim to improve student success for all students. One such policy is Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education strategy (2009), which outlines the need for more inclusive education with increased engagement of student groups (and their parents/guardians) who are currently underserved in the public education system. Specifically, the policy demonstrates—as does existing research— that school and system leadership play an integral role in creating and building more inclusive and equitable public education to improve all students' success at school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). As student populations become more diverse, however, supporting success for all groups of students increases the complexity of school leadership work (Ryan, 2016).

A leader's conceptualization of difference is crucial to both discerning problems (i.e., stereotypes and judgments) and devising solutions. What principals eventually do to promote equity and inclusion in their schools will fundamentally be tied to the ways in which they understand difference within student populations. This article explores how principals make sense of difference within student populations *and* how this sensemaking around student difference influences how they do their work. The more that is known about the ways principals

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understand diversity and difference and how these understandings influence how they work, the

sooner policymakers can provide suitable support to promote equitable education for all students

in increasingly diverse schools. In the next section, we define sensemaking and difference; the

third section provides details of the methodology used to gather and analyze data in this study.

The final sections present the findings and discussion, and the article concludes with

recommendations for practice and policy.

Sensemaking and Notions of Difference

Evans (2007) defined *sensemaking* as: "A cognitive act of taking in information, framing

it, and using it to determine actions and behaviours in a way that manages meaning for

individuals" (p. 161). How principals frame notions of difference within student populations is

important, because although educational institutions can produce societal change and

transformation, they can also generate and maintain social inequalities and inequities. Research

has shown that schools and school systems have mechanisms for systematically reproducing

advantages for some and disadvantages for others (Bowles and Gintis, 1976); because of

principals' influential roles within schools (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2013;

Gordon and Louis, 2009; Louis *et al.*, 2010), they can perpetuate inequitable and exclusionary

practices or challenge them (Dei and Calliste, 2000). How principals make sense of difference

within the student population is not necessarily new (DeMatthews, 2015), but less is known

about how the meaning principals make of student difference influences their actions,

behaviours, and practices. For example, how principals understand student diversity could

influence how they allocate funds to support specific programs, how they include parents in

public education, whether or not they engage in culturally appropriate leadership practices,

and/or what community programs and supports they may try to connect with outside the school.

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It is through this understanding of sensemaking and practice that policymakers and higher education institutions may be able to better understand how to tailor future professional learning opportunities for school leaders and what approaches or texts should be included in policies to decrease educational inequities for students and increase student success.

Diversity in education can be understood as the difference or "unlikeness" between individuals or groups of people; there are also multiple ways people understand social and educational difference. Diversity is often misunderstood as a synonym for ethnicity. As Ryan (2007) has suggested, "The most obvious kind of diversity is represented in the heritages, histories, and cultures of students" (p. 9). As such, many educators associate diversity with ethnicity, race, and culture. However, these are only a few of the many categories that can be used to describe differences within and among student populations. Recognizing differences or diversity within student populations can include categories that are more "visible" such as gender, ethnicity, some religious affiliations, and disabilities. Other differences are less visible, such as class, academic disabilities, or sexual orientation.

One approach to decrease educational inequities is to begin by determining how principals understand difference within student populations. Many critical theorists (Boyd *et al.*, 2016; Delpit, 2006; Egbo, 2009; Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Mezirow and Taylor, 2009) have argued that few educators have learned to adequately and critically assess their role in the context of dominance, which affects their perception of diversity. For higher education institutions, policymakers, and professional associations to develop school leaders who strive to include all students, they must provide the space, time, and resources required for leaders to question their own understandings of student diversity and reflect upon how they may be

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promoting inclusion of all or for some, and whether or not they are continuing the

disproportionate distribution of privilege and inequity in modern society.

Methodology

The arguments made in this article are supported by data from 59 semistructured

interviews with Ontario school principals. Participants were asked questions on a variety of

issues related to their work. Specifically, principals were asked: How has the increased

awareness of student diversity influenced the work you do? Diversity was purposefully not

defined prior to posing the question or within the question so that principals would freely answer

the question based on how they understood it. Some principals did ask, "What do you mean by

diversity?" These participants were instructed to describe how they understood diversity and then

describe how this understanding of diversity may influence their work.

Participant Recruitment

Several strategies were used to generate the sample of principals interviewed for the

study. First, seven Ontario district school boards agreed to participate; each participating district

school board then sent an official invitational e-mail to all active principals in the district. This

method of recruitment provided a limited number of participants—some districts initially had

better response rates than others. Next, supervisory officers from each board were asked to

identify and invite principals working in a range of contexts (e.g., rural/urban,

secondary/elementary, large/small schools) and with various years of experience to participate in

the study. Elements of both snowball and convenience sampling strategies were used to populate

the dataset during the latter stages of data collection, as participants identified colleagues they

thought might be interested in participating. The last recruitment effort included getting

permission to e-mail principals directly rather than going through the district office. The boards

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that were contacted agreed to allow our research team to e-mail principals directly by providing an e-mail list of school principals. Our research team sent direct e-mail invitations to all elementary and secondary school principals in five participating district schools boards. Principals recruited for the research in this way were asked to self-select by sending a positive response to the e-mail invitation. The greatest number of participants were engaged using this method. It is possible that recruitment via school boards had limited success because principals did not want their individual school boards to know if they were participating in the study. Only principals who were actively leading schools were interviewed: Those who were on sick leave or seconded to other roles in the education system were not interviewed.

Participants

Seven English-speaking school boards in Southern Ontario were selected for the study. These boards represented both secular and Catholic school boards—all publicly funded in Ontario. Prior to selecting participants, a matrix was developed to ensure a range of participants (i.e., urban and rural, elementary and secondary, experienced and inexperienced, male and female) was represented. In some cases, the school boards were small, and it was therefore impossible to secure representation for each category. In the findings section, all participants are described using pseudonyms.

Table 1 outlines a range of four to 16 principals at each of the seven school boards. Of the 59 principals, 46 had at least five years of experience, while 13 had less than five. Forty-six of the 59 participants were employed in the elementary panel, with only 13 working in secondary schools. In terms of gender, 24 of the 59 principals were male, and 35 were female. Thirty-nine principals worked in schools located in urban areas with relatively high levels of population density, while 20 worked in rural settings. Overall, the principals represented a range of contexts,

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levels of experience, and genders. Where there was little difference was in terms of race and

ethnicity: All participants self-identified as Caucasian. The homogeneity of the participants in

terms of race and ethnicity is not surprising, given that approximately 93% of the principal

workforce in the English-speaking Ontario Public education system is White (Pollock *et al.*,

2014).

[Insert Table 1]

Participant Characteristics

Data Analysis

Principal interviews were recorded using an iPad application and/or digital voice

recorders, and the audio recordings were transcribed. Interviews lasted between one and two

hours. First, interviews were analyzed using the *constant comparative method* (Savin-Baden and

Major, 2012) to identify recurrent themes associated with principals' conceptualization of

difference in the transcripts. These themes became distinct codes; for example, comments that

stated there was no diversity within the school (i.e., an all-white population) were coded as *no*

diversity (ND). If the principal conceptualized the student population by color, race, or ethnic

differences, it was coded as perceptions of *visibly diverse student population* (VD). Tendencies

to see diversity in terms of academic, language, physical, or gender orientation were coded as

less visible differences (LVD), and visible and nonvisible aspects were coded as *all-inclusive*

(IC). Then, within each of these categories, any leadership practices that principals attributed to

how they understood the differences within student population or the opposite, no change in

practice, were coded.

Findings

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Principals in this study understood student diversity in different ways and these understandings influenced their work. The findings first describe the various ways principals understand difference within student populations, followed by how these understandings influenced or did not change how they engaged in their work. Four themes emerged in principals' descriptions of student populations: (a) perceiving everyone as the same, or homogeneous; (b) perceiving visible differences associated with particular religions, race, and cultures; (c) perceiving invisible or less visible differences, such as academic differences, socioeconomic status, mental health issues, gender identity, and sexual orientation; and (d) perceiving both visible and less visible differences through an inclusive lens.

Describing Student Populations

As mentioned earlier, participants were asked to describe how they understood student diversity or diversity within the student population. Participants were not provided with a standard definition because we wanted to know how principal practitioners understood this phenomenon. Data analysis determined that participants responses fell into four broad categories: everyone is the same, visible differences, less visible differences, and an all-inclusive understanding of difference.

Everyone is the same. Sixteen principals—all English-speaking, White, and rural—indicated that everyone was the same or similar, and that there was no diversity or difference within their student population. For example, Alice stated, "Our region is a very homogenous society and diverse it is not. As far as race, religion, sexual orientation it's not prominent at this point in our K–6 school." Larry reiterated the same idea by stating, "I would say we are more or less homogenous." The homogeneous student population participants were referencing appeared to be English-speaking, White students that reflect the larger Ontario population. Tory's response

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reflected this particular dominant group: "We're in a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant area. We

mostly have a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant staff." Principals in this category understood

difference in their student populations through a narrow definition based on culture, religion,

race, or ethnicity. It should be noted that, even though these principals did not acknowledge other

categories of difference such as ability or socioeconomic status, this does not mean that these

schools did not have student populations with other categories of differences.

Visible differences. Fourteen principals described their schools' student populations as

diverse in terms of visible differences such as culture, ethnicity, race, language, and/or religion.

These differences were described in relation to the dominant populations in Ontario schools

(White, middle-class, Eurocentric). The differences mentioned here refer to groups of students

that diverge from this norm in terms of culture, ethnicity, race, language, and/or religion—in

other words, anyone not part of the dominant group. Paula commented:

> … in this region there are pockets that are more diverse. We have a lot of immigration in
> this area and there's increasing awareness about diversity in all aspects such as cultural
> background, religion, sexual orientation, or just kids being different.

In some cases, participants described having one or two groups of students that were not the

same as the majority, dominant group. Linda's school had "a higher number of Spanish speaking

folks than before, [and a] relatively large Islamic population." Others described their student

populations as diverse because their schools included multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds. As

Josh said, "We have every shade of ethnic diversity." Dan described his student population as

having:

> … almost everything. We have Spanish, East Asian, Vietnamese. We have students from
> Africa, and I don't know the exact countries. We have students from the Caribbean and a
> lot from Sudan, Nairobi, Ghana…. 27 countries represented in this school.

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In Dan and Josh's case, the composition of the student population was slightly different than that of Linda's, because they indicated that there was not a majority group of students (based on race or ethnicity) that attended their school.

As mentioned in the previous section, the fact that these principals only acknowledged categories of difference based on religion, race, ethnicity, language, and culture, does not mean that there were not groups of students within these schools that also differed based on academic ability, socioeconomic status, mental health issues, gender identity, and sexual orientation. However, the principals at these schools did not consider these categories of difference when thinking about difference or diversity within their student populations: Children from other student populations were not included these principals' descriptions of difference because of how they themselves understood difference within their student populations.

Less visible differences. Of the 59 principal's interviews analyzed, 19 described student diversity in terms of characteristics *less* visible to the human eye, such as academic needs, socioeconomic status, mental health needs, and sexual orientation. Of these 19, most principals focused on one or many of these specific aspects and suggested their schools' student populations were diverse in less visible ways. For example, Martin explained,

> We are primarily White Anglo-Saxon out in the hallway, but that's only skin tone. There is much more diversity that comes with economic status, academic issues, mental health issues, and sexual orientation. Diversity today is much greater even though we have generally the same appearance of the population here.

Martin demonstrated his conceptualization of difference in his student population: Even though the student population at his school was not diverse in terms of visible characteristics such as culture, ethnicity, race, language and/or religion, there were still populations of students at his school that were different in terms of socioeconomic status, academic ability, mental health issues, and sexual orientation.

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Scott's approach to diversity concentrated on learning needs: "We are not diverse culturally. Everyone pretty much looks the same, but we have a lot of diversity in terms of learning [needs] and this is where differentiated learning comes in." Linda supported this notion of difference in terms students in special education programs: "I see diversity in special education; the trademark of our school is that students are fully immersed with special education who are integrated into their classroom and the school routine." Others focused on the socioeconomic status of families; as Bill explained, "Diversity in my school is related to socioeconomic status. We are working at giving equal access to learning to kids who are coming from lower economic homes." Another principal, Tony, reported that his student population has changed in terms of recognition of sexual orientation: "We're predominantly White, middle-class but a big change has been [recognition of] gay and lesbian orientations." Most principals in this category qualified their description of student difference by first making reference to how homogenous the student population was based on race and ethnicity, and then describing difference based on less visible differences such as socioeconomic status, academic ability, mental health issues, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

All-inclusive understanding of difference. Ten principals described diversity in a more inclusive manner. In this group, principals included categories of difference that incorporated both less visible characteristics and more visible differences. They described different combinations of diverse student populations using both visible and less visible descriptors. Interestingly, these principals did not indicate that they experienced these differences within their *current* school site. As Paula explained,

> As for cultural level diversity, we are very White-Anglo-Saxon Orange [Protestant] community. We don't have a lot of diversity in terms of culture. Our kids are White here. In other areas you see cultural diversity, the beautiful rainbow of colours. So we don't have that. We have other [kinds of] diversity in our community. We have rural kids, and

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urban kids in our community. Some of our rural kids live in very low-income housing. There are also some very wealthy people. We have a lot of health issues, there are a lot of mental health issues. So [student] needs are really diverse in the school. It is not really a homogenous school.

Paula demonstrated that she conceptualizes diversity in an inclusive manner and has a broad

understanding of difference, even though many of these differences do not appear to exist in her

local school population. This smaller group of principals described student difference and

diversity as including visible, less visible, and/or nonvisible characteristics. Linda explained that

she has been a principal at five different high schools and, based on her cumulative experience,

diversity is defined differently for each school based on the needs of that specific school context.

Practices Influenced by Principals' Sensemaking around Student Difference and Diversity

We asked principals how their sensemaking around student difference influenced how

they did their work. Principals' responses varied from not influencing their work to influencing

practices and activities, which included different kinds of school activities, tasks, programming,

and accommodations at their school site.

No change in practice. The principals who indicated that their schools did not include

diverse student populations (according to their understanding of difference) reported that their

work was not influenced by the growing recognition that Ontario has increasingly diverse

student populations. Elana stated, "There is a little bit of diversity but not really a lot. I can

honestly say that there is not really, that has not impacted me here. I have come through schools

it has, but, honestly, here, no." This does not mean, however, that principals in this group did

not, for example, engage in special education initiatives and supports for students that could

conceivably require other kinds of assistance. What it means is that, according to these

principals' understandings of diverse student populations, they did not see the need to support a

particular student population that required them to engage in different behaviours or practices.

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Influence on practice. The principals who reported that difference within their student population influenced how they go about doing their work described many different practices and activities that included different kinds of school activities, tasks, programming, and accommodations at their school site.

Difference based on race, ethnicity, and religion. School principals who described difference based on race/ethnicity, religion, culture, and language engaged in several practices that they felt supported students' success at school. Dennis asserted, "You have to have a game plan for your changing student population's needs." Colin explained that his school has many new Canadians and English Language Learner (ELL) students, which has a big impact on the school: "We try to celebrate the multiculturalism in the school. We talk about it with teachers. We talk often about how do we help those kids in the classroom, how do we communicate with their parents, how do we engage parents with what we are doing at school. These are big questions." Several principals described the work they do as *inclusive practices* and began their discussion by first describing ways they try to help students feel included in the school. Bill stated, "Every student from another country has a flag in our gymnasium, it's lined with all those flags and our kids are like, 'that's my country.' So they feel welcomed here." Principals in this study also spoke about the level of work they do to connect to parents and community services outside the school. Some reported implementing a practice of translating school newsletters in multiple languages and engaging in practices that recognized cultural differences, such as various religious celebrations throughout the school year. Armin stated: "We do our letters in three different languages. The main languages here are English, Arabic, Mandarin."

Principals also connect with community organizations. They described using settlement workers, child and youth care workers, and translation services to support school programs. For

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example, Paul described how his school has "settlement workers with an office in the school and meetings are held throughout the day for parents and students." Mary stated that she "deal(s) with Family and Children Services to get support because we have new immigrant families and they need to understand the Canadian culture and that's just a lot of work we have to do." The additional school personnel and collaboration with outside agencies directly affects principals' work because they are responsible for these new positions in their schools. Dennis stated, "It's a more complex scenario. It's hard to keep that all together, and do the management and everything else. So it's bigger work that way, if I can keep up. It's overwhelming if I can't." Dennis' comment also hints at the challenges that coordinating additional personnel and services with existing work demands and expectations can entail. The additional tasks and coordination of people and resources were also prevalent for principals who indicated that they concentrated on academic needs, socioeconomic status, mental health needs, and sexual orientation.

Student difference other than race, ethnicity, and religion. Those who spoke about less visible differences within their student populations—such as academic needs, socioeconomic status, mental health needs, and sexual orientation—indicated that acknowledging these differences and working toward a more inclusive approach to schooling meant that they engaged in specific kinds of work. The principals in this category were more likely to focus on providing additional help to support the academic, social, and mental health needs of their students. As Martine explained:

> These are things you wouldn't think would be part and parcel of an administrator or even a school's responsibility are there. We can't ignore it. We can't ignore mental health, we can't ignore hunger…Some things are brand new and some the volume has increased immensely.

Martine's response demonstrated that she assumes there is an expectation on her as a school leader to meet the needs of students with mental health issues and who live in poverty. Paul

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argued that "schools have become places that reach beyond academics needs." Some principals

suggested that they must now be conscious of children whose parents may not be able to afford

to feed them three meals a day or provide warm clothes during the colder months. Some

principals suggested that schools have changed to become supporters of both students *and*

families to provide basic needs for children. Mary-Lou indicated that part of her work includes

taking a more active role to meet the basic needs of students *and families*:

> I just don't do instructional leadership. I am looking at going to homes with food, and
> student lunches, and worrying about who has got boots, and who is trained to organize
> this. It's up to you to do that. And to me that's in the forefront. It's an added layer to my
> role.

In general, Martine and Mary-Lou's experiences are not unique; principals supporting breakfast

programs and clothing drives is not necessarily new work but, as argued elsewhere (Pollock,

2016), it is the degree to which principals are now engaged in supporting families in their

communities that has influenced their work. In this specific context, for those principals that

recognize the socioeconomic struggles of community families and choose to support students

from this population, it is the amount of time dedicated and additional efforts required to engage

in fundraising to meet the needs of their students that have changed (Pollock, 2016; Winton,

2018; Winton and Brewer, 2014).

Besides attempting to mitigate socioeconomic struggles for students, some principals in

this study commented that they have engaged in other kinds of work due to increased recognition

of gender differences and sexual orientation. Specifically, principals have had to engage in

additional work to provide safe spaces for students and to provide professional support for staff.

As Mary stated:

> Young kids are "coming out" when they are identifying male when they were born
> female. And I have a young girl in Grade 7 who's identifying as being gay. She says no
> one is giving her a hard time and she is quite open and out there, but she's having a lot of

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anxiety issues right now and she's missing a heck of a lot of school. And I need to find out the right social supports and emotional supports in place for these kids.

In Mary's case, she acknowledged student differences based on gender and sexual orientation, and that part of her role is to seek out supports that have not yet been considered in traditional schooling or that do not yet exist and somehow incorporate them into current schooling.

Discussion

In this article, we examined school principals' responses to the ways in which they make sense of student differences and how these conceptions of difference influence their work. It was clear that participants sensemaking around student diversity was influenced by both their points of reference and local contexts. Participants' context—both personal and local—influenced some of the work they did in their role as school principal. In addition, multiple sources of disconnect exist between principals' understandings and their practices, between their practices and existing policies, and between their practices and the need to prepare global citizens with 21st century competencies.

Personal Context and Points of Reference

As mentioned earlier, diversity in educational contexts can be understood as the difference or "unlikeness" between individuals or groups of people. In this study, our findings demonstrated that principals who reported little to no difference within their student population did so using a particular point of reference to determine difference or similarity. According to previous studies (Evans, 2007; Ryan, 2011), principals' sensemaking around difference and diversity is influenced by who they are as people and the student populations they serve. In other words, all principals in this study made sense of student difference based on how their students differed compared to themselves. This finding reflects Ryan's (2011) argument that a person's social position will significantly impact how they produce meaning.

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The personal contexts for the principals in this study—and by extension their points of reference—included being White, English-speaking, able-bodied, economically secure, Christian, and heterosexual. According to a study of principals in the Ontario secular school system, most of these points of reference reflect the present Ontario principal population, which is more than 90% White, 97% English-speaking, and 91% heterosexual (Pollock, 2014). Our findings reveal that principals in this study appear to make meaning about or understand student diversity through their own positionality. Although it is unsurprising that individual school leaders would make sense of student diversity through their own worldview and positionality, lack of critical self-exploration that involves deconstructing one's personal belief and knowledge systems can perpetuate systemic inequities within the public education system.

Researchers have indicated (Gordon and Louis, 2009; Louis *et al*., 2010; The Institute for Education Leadership, 2008) that next to teachers, school leaders have the most influence in schools. As such, school leaders have ample potential to influence school practices to critically challenge dominant societal views, how diversity is constructed, and conventional ways of thinking and teaching. Schools, and thus school leaders, can either reproduce or deconstruct, conform or critique, continue or transform understandings of diversity in their school communities. Put simply, school leaders have the capacity to lead change. Due to work intensification, however, few educators have the time or resources, both personal and professional, to learn how to adequately and critically assess their role in context of dominance, which can affect their perception of diversity (Briscoe and Pollock, 2017; Ryan, 2016; Wang *et al*., 2018a, 2018b). To develop these crucial skills, school leaders must have access to continued professional learning and have opportunities and time to reflect on and deconstruct their own beliefs and assumptions.

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Because positionality does play such an important role, our findings support the call by researchers, practitioners, and students for a more diversified school leadership workforce (Ryan *et al.*, 2009). If the Ontario public education system is working toward a more inclusive education system, then the principal workforce should also reflect this goal. Representation is a reflection of the communities and societies in which we live; in a truly inclusive and equitable education system, there will be proportional representation among teachers and administrators. In practical terms, having "difference" represented in the educator workforce will have an impact on what and how students learn. Without diversity in leadership, students will learn that certain groups of people are better suited to occupy positions of authority in their communities and that this inequity is natural and normal. Scholars have argued that these arrangements can alienate certain groups of students from the education process and sabotage their motivation (Ryan, 2012); conversely, having a diverse group of school principals can be a source of inspiration for students.

Local Context

Principals' positionality is not the only important influence—local context also matters. Sensemaking is not solely based on a person's positioning, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions; as a process, sensemaking is socially constructed, which is also influenced by context (Evans, 2007; Ryan, 2011). Our findings also demonstrated that, even though there appeared to be consistency in our participants' *reference points for determining differences* within their student populations, their *local school context mattered*. The majority of principals' explanations of difference were subject to the schools in which they worked: not necessarily based on any policy or program definition, but based on pragmatic and practical circumstances in which principals found themselves working. These pragmatic approaches that are solely based on school leaders'

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understanding of student difference raise additional questions, however. For example, what about

groups of students that might not be recognized within various school populations? Do these

understandings and practices correspond to existing provincial policies? Are students at these

schools being suitably equipped to become global citizens in the 21st century?

Multiple Sources of Disconnect

According to our study findings, there were several sources of disconnect between

principals' understanding of student differences and the work they do. In this section, we

problematize the disconnects between principals' understandings of difference and what is going

on in their schools, between principals' understandings of difference and existing equity policy,

and between principals' understandings of difference and the need for school leaders to create

global citizens with 21st century competencies.

Misalignment between practices and understandings. Principals' sensemaking around

difference and diversity in student bodies does not necessarily align with practices in their

schools. This is most apparent for the principals who indicated that there are no differences

within their student populations. For principals in this category, difference was narrowly defined:

They mainly considered difference along the lines of race and ethnicity, and indicated that

because they had no racially and ethnically "different" students, they felt their work was not

influenced by how they understood difference. The principals in this group ignored other forms

of difference, such as ability and socioeconomic status, but all schools in Ontario engage in

differentiated instruction as part of a province-wide teaching and learning initiative; each school

also possesses a portion of students with varying levels of ability who have individual

educational plans (IEPs). Therefore, these principals do engage in leadership practices that are

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influenced by groups of students that are different from their reference points. This misalignment

is not necessarily negative, but it is certainly noteworthy that the disconnect exists.

Gap between principals' understandings of difference and diversity and existing

policy. Many of the principals' notions of difference also lacked connection with the present

policy, the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, that is meant to inform their

practices and the practices of their schools. In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education

implemented the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2009). This strategy provides direction to principals about how the provincial

government understands student diversity and what the expectations are for school principals.

The strategy describes diversity as "the presence of a wide range of human qualities and

attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are

not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and

intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status" (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6).

Our findings demonstrate varying degrees of disconnect between the detailed strategy

description and the majority of the sensemaking around difference described by our 59

interviewees. For example, unless a school has an extremely small student population, it is nearly

impossible for an Ontario public school to have no diversity within its student population, as

some principals had claimed. These principals—those who claimed that there is no student

diversity within the school population—demonstrated a narrow understanding of student

difference, which further suggests a possible lack of knowledge and understanding about the

Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. This is significant, because the Equity and

Inclusive Education Strategy had already been in place for several years before we collected our

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data. The aims of this initiative cannot come to fruition if some principals do not recognize or

acknowledge differences within student populations as a result of their sensemaking processes.

Principals' sensemaking about difference and diversity and preparing global

citizens with 21st century competencies. In this section, we describe our most far-reaching and

significant finding. Given that principals' influence is only second to teachers (Leithwood *et al*.,

2004), and that principals are uniquely able to promote or undermine equity and inclusion in

their schools (Ryan 2003, 2006, 2012), principals' sensemaking about difference will necessarily

impact the exposure and understanding their students have to and about diversity, difference, and

inclusion. In this study, we specifically asked principals how increased awareness of student

diversity has influenced the work they do; we did not specifically ask them how diverse their

own student population was in the school where they work. We phrased the question broadly

enough to capture not only specific content but also their awareness of discourses around

national and provincial trends of increasingly diverse student populations (Statistics Canada,

2017, 2018).

Principals who perceive no difference, or narrowly defined differences, indicated that

their practices are not impacted by the increasing diversity of student populations in Ontario.

This is directly at odds with the expectation that principals ensure their students become

competent, global citizens who can adapt to the diverse contexts of the 21st century. Being

reactive to their student population needs is important, but principals are also expected to prepare

students with 21st century skills, such as the ability to collaborate where students can

successfully **"**work in teams, learn from and contribute to the learning of others, [use] social

networking skills, [and demonstrate] empathy in working with diverse others" (Fullan, 2013, p.

9). Not seeing or acknowledging difference in their own student bodies risks only preparing

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students for their immediate environment: In other words, if principals aren't enacting inclusive or equitable practices in their schools because they do not perceive or acknowledge differences in their student bodies, students are not being prepared for the reality of 21st century global citizenship. According to Fullan and Scott (2014), this involves students having the ability to consider global issues based on a deep understanding of diverse values, be able to solve complex problems that impact human and environmental sustainability, and have a genuine interest in engaging with others (p. 6).

In our data, there seemed to be a pervasive assumption that, if there was no recognizable difference within the local student population, there was no need to consider difference or contemplate issues of equity and inclusion within the school site. This has many practical ramifications. Consider that in ethnically, racially, and religiously "homogeneous" schools—in other words, no visibly minoritized students—students may not be engaging in antiracism initiatives. This has short-term and long-term repercussions. In the short-term, a school that does not report acts of racism does not necessarily lack students who hold racist views. Schools that are racially and ethnically homogenous can still have racist students and educators—it might just mean that these exclusionary practices do not play out the same way. Do schools like these merely wait until there is a student from a visibly minoritized group to join the school and potentially experience harmful racist events before they consider antiracist programs? In the long-term, students who are not learning to challenge their own biases because they did not have to confront them at school will be at a profound disadvantage once they graduate: They may have experienced school surrounded by people who look like them and believe what they believe, but statistically speaking that is not what Ontario, Canada, or the world looks like in the 21st century. Not only will these students lack these 21st century competencies, but this also

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means that are more likely to perpetuate unconscious biases that will negatively impact the

visibly minoritized, LGBTQ2+, and less socioeconomically advantaged people they will

necessarily meet after they finish school.

Implications for Future Practice and Policy

The changing nature of contemporary schooling—and society—is challenging principals

to reflect on their sensemaking around student difference and diversity and to confront their own

assumptions and biases surrounding their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. This is not only critical

for supporting the development of students' 21st century competencies, but also for cultivating

their positive global citizenship—especially in a time when students may not be encouraged to

embrace difference while being widely exposed to bigotry and hatred on the Internet and through

the various social media platforms currently available. Our findings strongly support the need for

school leaders to actively seek and cultivate new understandings, and that they must not only

critically self-reflect and deconstruct their own personal belief and knowledge systems, but also

engage in practices that enable them to lead their respective schools in more equitable and

inclusive ways.

Although there have been in-roads made over the past decade, such as the creation of

professional development modules from professional associations such as the Ontario Principals'

Council (OPC, 2019), there is still much work to do. Tuters and Portelli (2017) have argued that

there needs to be substantial changes made in Ontario principal preparation programs to promote

equitable and inclusive education. In our view, there are two concerns with current professional

learning. The first is content, which Tuters and Portelli (2017) have suggested, and the other is

delivery. Of the two, delivery has received comparatively less scholarly attention. On average,

principals in Ontario work at a school site for fewer than four years before moving either

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laterally to another school/school system or to the superintendent position (Dhuey and Smith, 2014). For some principals, this means professional learning opportunities can be missed, discontinued, or disrupted. Therefore, even though there may now be some professional learning available around equitable and inclusive schooling, some school leaders may not be able to access it because of workplace transitions.

Continual work site transitions are not the only issue, however. Currently, the majority of Ontario school principals are experiencing work intensification (Hauseman *et al.*, 2017; Pollock and Hauseman, 2014, 2018; Pollock, 2016; Pollock and Wang, 2019; Pollock *et al.*, 2014, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b). Specifically, they work on average 59 hours per week and, of these hours, they are engaged in less than two hours on professional learning for themselves and/or their teaching staff (Pollock *et al.*, 2014). Due to the changing nature of their work (Pollock and Hauseman, 2014), many principals struggle to find the time to engage in necessary professional learning because it ends up not being a high priority item. As such, work intensification complicates principals' ability to engage in professional learning opportunities and incorporate the learning into their practice—often, they just do not have the time required to enact meaningful change. It is also important to note that the issues around professional learning are not solely about content or mode of delivery. Equally important are *continual, ongoing* professional learning opportunities, which are required to ensure system change. As with any new program and policy initiative, it appears that there were funds attached to launching the 2009 Equity and Inclusive Education Initiative to support professional learning, but currently there are less funds available for continued professional learning in this area. This lack of funding especially impacts principals who experience work intensification *and* continually change work sites.

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Given these issues, the main implication is that perhaps the content and delivery of the current professional learning available is no longer a good fit for principals within the context of the work mobility and work intensification they experience. Current and future professional learning needs to be re-evaluated with the aim of ensuring that school leaders receive the necessary and ongoing professional learning required, and that space is created for them to reflect on their own understandings around difference and diversity. As mentioned earlier, however, it is not enough to merely gain additional insights around diversity and difference within student populations, it is also about what to do with this new knowledge and understanding and translate it into practice: The difference is *knowing* and *knowing how*. It can be the case that many principals do know that there are differences within groups of students in their schools and that the general Canadian population is becoming increasingly diverse, but do not see any need to embrace difference; it may also be the case that many may also not know *how* to change their practice to create equitable and inclusive schooling that cultivates 21st century competencies in all groups of students. It is important to note that providing principals with the support they need to reflect upon their practices may only be part of the solution. Principals may hold discriminatory beliefs about particular groups of students and resist changing these assumptions and beliefs and, as a result, their practices. They must be willing to interrogate their own personal beliefs and assumptions for any supports to facilitate meaningful change, and they must be willing to act upon any new insights that may promote equity and inclusion in their schools.

Lastly, in terms of public policy, it appears there is only one initiative focused on equitable and inclusive education. Although all provincial government policies are meant to influence practice, the K–12 School Effectiveness Framework, which is part of the Ontario

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Leadership Framework (OLF), is meant to drive all aspects of public schooling—it is the "go-to" policy outside of the Ontario Education Act of 1990. In addition to the School Effectiveness Framework, the OLF includes three other important documents: *District Effectiveness Framework*, the *System-level Leadership document*, and the *K-12 School Level Leadership document*; these documents are meant to guide principals' practices. Currently, these documents make assumptions about student difference and diversity and only occasionally refer to equitable and inclusive schools. Given the challenges around current professional learning, principal mobility, and work intensification, it is crucial to have central provincial policy that explicitly outlines the expectations around and potential practices that can support diverse student populations. We recommend that the OLF be enhanced and updated to clearly state expectations and possible practices that embrace difference within student populations through equitable and inclusive schooling.

Conclusion

The study findings go beyond merely discovering how principals make meaning around diverse student populations, which has been investigated elsewhere (DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007; Ryan 2011). Specifically, the findings point to the ways in which principals' sensemaking around student difference influences how they work, what they prioritize, and the tasks in which they engage. Four themes emerged in principals' descriptions of student populations: (a) perceiving everyone as the same, or homogeneous; (b) perceiving visible differences associated with particular religions, races, and cultures; (c) perceiving invisible or less visible differences, such as academic differences, socioeconomic status, mental health issues, gender identity, and sexual orientation; and (d) perceiving both visible and less visible differences through an inclusive lens. When asked about how their understanding of difference influenced how they did

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their work, principals' responses varied from not influencing their work as all to influencing

practices and activities, which included different kinds of school activities, tasks, programming,

and accommodations at their school site. Our analysis determined that participants' sensemaking

around student difference and diversity was influenced both by their points of reference and local

contexts. Lastly, our findings demonstrate multiple sources of disconnect, such as misalignment

between how principals understand difference and the practices they engage in at their school

site; between their sensemaking about difference and diversity and preparing students for 21st

century competencies as global citizens; between principals' understandings on difference and

diversity and existing provincial policy. Overall, changes are needed in both policy and practice

to address these existing disconnects between sensemaking and practice; specifically, these

changes must target the content and delivery of professional learning, policies around equity and

inclusion, and principals' work intensification.

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Table 1

Participant Characteristics

School Board	Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Elementary	Secondary	EX*	LE**	Total
Number 1	2	4	2	4	5	1	6	0	**6**
Number 2	8	8	13	3	13	3	12	4	**16**
Number 3	1	2	0	3	3	0	2	1	**3**
Number 4	3	4	6	1	5	2	6	1	**7**
Number 5	4	5	6	3	7	2	6	3	**9**
Number 6	1	6	2	5	6	1	6	1	**7**
Number 7	5	6	10	1	7	4	8	3	**11**
Total	**24**	**35**	**39**	**20**	**46**	**13**	**46**	**13**	**59**

* EX: Experience as principal for more than 5 years

**LE: Experience as a principal for less than 5 years