Advocacy and administration: from conflict to collaboration

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Abstract *Reports the findings of a qualitative study investigating the interactions relating to special education between principals and parent advocates. Specifically focuses on variations in perspectives among the principals and parent advocates on disability, special education and inclusion. Places a particular emphasis on exploring the perceived power imbalances in decision-making processes and in incompatibility or conflict among values and interests. Data collected through a series of individual interviews and group dialogues involving both advocates and administrators, reveal how the participants define and manage their respective professional roles as they engage with one another in resolving ethical dilemmas in special education. The findings provide rich illustrations of shared decision-making processes, alternative knowledge and understandings of special education and disability, and more politicized forms of parent involvement. These dialogical interactions also reveal the inequities, power imbalances and politics within organizational arenas that promote conflict. Proposes democratic, critical, and collaborative approaches to interactions as appropriate processes for managing such conflict.*

Historical patterns of hierarchical control in school systems, and the current dominance of performance criteria, efficiency, and economic agendas as meta-values, pose significant challenges to the promotion of democratic forms of interaction between parent advocates and principals. Unexamined values, competing conceptions and adversarial practices common to educational processes have major implications for how questions get framed, who gets invited to ask the critical questions, and what becomes admissible as alternative solutions to problems in special education.

Conceptual understandings of special education and disability are informed by numerous disciplines which themselves draw on different scholarly traditions – namely the medical sciences and the social sciences. There is a considerable lack of conceptual clarity and agreement in both scholarly inquiry and practice in the field. Conceptual differences, coupled with the practical demands of meeting the needs and interests of various stakeholders, make special education a uniquely problematic area of study and practice (Barnes *et al.*, 1999; Burrello *et al.*, 2001; Clark *et al.*, 1998; Skrtic, 1995; Slee, 2001; Thomas and Loxley, 2001; Zaretsky, 2003). Yet for the sake of children and their education it is these very complexities and tensions associated with the study and practice of special education that warrant more focused and intensive examination.

Among the people with a vested interest in disability and special education are, of course, principals charged with the day-to-day running of schools and parent advocates attempting to maximize educational benefits for their (and

other) children. Illuminating the divergence of perspectives among the stakeholders holds the promise of deepening our understanding of how and why principals and parent advocates come to know disability and special education in different ways.

Principals' and parent advocates' underlying and contrasting assumptions about such notions as "normal", "deviance", and "inclusion", can generate dilemmas that confound their attempts to resolve highly problematic issues in special education. If anything, these complexities demand that scholars and practitioners adopt a more critical disposition to the theoretical knowledge behind special education and re-examine the ways in which special education and disability have been traditionally framed at the micro-level of local school practices. There is a need for more culturally and politically contextualized approaches to interactions between principals and parent advocates so they can examine their own and others' assumptions and openly acknowledge which interpretations are guiding their actions. Furthermore, democratic forms of interactive practice might support principals and parents in understanding how different perspectives dominate and shape their values and practices in the decision-making arena.

Framing the research study

The qualitative study described in this article focused on parent advocates' and principals' perceptions of their interactions related to the resolution of problems in special education. Three specific questions were addressed:

(1) How do principals and parent advocates come to know and understand special education in different ways?

(2) In what ways do differences in competing conceptions of disability, special education and inclusion compete with each other for dominance and thereby compromise interactions?

(3) How do principals and advocates define democratic practice in their dialogical interactions?

These questions provide the analytic focus of this study, and lead to a discussion of parent advocates' and principals' roles in developing more inclusive practices capable of managing highly contentious issues in special education.

Six experienced elementary school principals and seven parent advocates participated in this study. The principals were selected from several district school boards in the province of Ontario, Canada to provide a sample not solely reflective of any single district's programs, practices and policies in special education. The parent advocates were affiliated with various special education advocacy organizations found throughout the province of Ontario, Canada. These advocates had a minimum of two years' experience in an advocacy role and at some point had children with special needs enrolled in a district school

board within Ontario. Both the principals and parent advocates participated in a series of interviews as well as focus group discussions aimed at drawing on their personal experiences in schools and illuminating their perceptions of disability and special education. Data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic strategy aimed at identifying persistent similarities and differences within and across participants' perspectives.

Parent advocacy

When parents advocate for children with exceptionalities they often challenge deep-seated beliefs about disability and special education. As a result, their interactions with school personnel often become confrontational and conflicted (Brown, 1999; Ware, 1999; Vincent, 2000). The intent of parent advocacy is changing the status quo and correcting power imbalances and other perceived injustices in the parent-school arena. Fundamental differences in outlook become highlighted and clashes of values and interests result, rooted in variations in perspectives on disability, special education, and inclusive practices between parent advocates and principals.

Findings from this study indicate that parent advocates gradually become more politicized as they engage in the struggle to achieve what they believe to be their own children's rights to the same experiences and opportunities afforded children without disabilities. The parent advocates quickly learn that connecting with other parents of disabled children is a vital way of gaining collective strength to achieve their goals in special education. Through networking and sharing of information, parents are able to develop their knowledge and the advocacy competencies needed to assert their right to be heard in political and educational policy and practice arenas (Alper et al., 1994; Fiedler, 2000; Nachshen and Jamieson, 2000). In this regard, parent advocates merge their personal and professional identities, as they transform their parenthood into political parenthood and begin to engage in political activism in schools (Brown, 1999; Nelson et al., 1993; Ruddick, 1990; Vincent, 2000). Also, their collective actions begin to support other families in developing their own advocacy competencies.

Parents of children with disabilities generally enter the special education arena with particular expectations. They hope to work alongside school staff to achieve a sense of belonging and acceptance for their children. They expect some freedom of choice among options available for their child, as well as some power and influence over processes to the extent that school staff will listen to them and value their input. Lastly, they aspire for a sense of comfort derived from knowing that special education processes need not be painful (Weishaar and Borsa, 2001; Wolfendale, 1989). If one or more of these needs are threatened during a meeting, conflict is likely to occur. To be sure, conflict can arise whenever there is a failure to achieve mutually compatible goals between two or more parties. The more common examples involve school personnel making

decisions on student programming and placement unilaterally, without consultation with parents. Notwithstanding these differing perspectives and conflicts, parent advocates and principals in this study generally shared the belief that schools do not necessarily serve all children equally well.

Competing perspectives and interests

Many conflicts in special education originate in the contrasting perspectives of parents and principals about children's special education programs, identifications, and placements. The issues raised by both parent advocates and principals in this study tended to revolve around conflicts of interests and competing perspectives. Conflicts of interests often arose when both parties agreed about the need to take some position on an issue or use of some resource, but disagreed over the finer details relating to control and distribution. For example, several principals recognized the value of having educational assistants in classrooms to support learners with special needs, but did not always see the value of educational assistants for particular children they felt no longer required the support. In contrast, parent advocates generally argued that that these special needs students had succeeded as a direct result of that support.

One parent advocate shared the following example:

> My daughter had a tremendous kindergarten year as a result of a very supportive itinerant teacher for the deaf who visited her regularly and a teaching assistant in the classroom. The principal said that since she had done so well, he didn't think she would need the support anymore in Grade 1. I replied that she's done so well because she's had the support. She's deaf. And this is what it means to be deaf. And I had to educate this principal about the implications of having no support for a deaf child.

In other cases, principals agreed that more educational assistants were needed if particular students were to experience success, yet they claimed that they simply had no more support resources to offer.

As one principal explained it:

> I try to explain to parents and my staff that I really am listening to you, but that doesn't mean I'm able to provide you with what you're asking for. I need to hear more often from parents what they might be able to help me with when I have no more to give without taking away from someone else in need.

Competing perspectives seemed most apparent between parent advocates and principals when they differed fundamentally in their perceptions of what was desirable. In discussing their interactions, parent advocates and principals were able to explicate many of the values that guided their choices during decision-making processes. Furthermore, they were also able to articulate what values they would seek to promote during their interactions relating to special education. When reflecting on their more conflicted interactions, many parent advocates and principals reported that they had to confront many of their own

and others' valued assumptions which appeared to shape people's perspectives on social and educational arrangements in special education.

Differences in perspectives on interactive practices in special education

Principals and parent advocates' perspectives on special education generally and their arguments on specific issues such as defining inclusion, were found to have had a major influence on desired outcomes (e.g. full inclusion of a child with severe developmental disabilities into a general education classroom) in this study. Four perspectives on interactive practice were identified in the data analysis of this study, and are examined in turn below.

A social-democratic perspective

Principals and parent advocates frequently manifested democratic values in their speech and actions. These included:

- a respect for diversity and differences in people and their perspectives;
- collaboration in partnerships;
- care, trust, transparency, and honesty in professional relationships;
- equity in decision-making processes; and
- quality and inclusive education for all students.

All the participants in this study acknowledged the challenges confronted by school administrators charged with the difficult task of carrying out instructional directives and school improvement initiatives within the constraints imposed by a climate of reform, standardization and increased accountability. They recognized that the greatest challenge was to understand how their activities, aimed at living out these sets of democratic values in their practices, can have the reverse effect of potentially disenfranchising certain groups of students and their families. For example, principals and parent advocates emphasized that tensions and conflicts often accompanied the introduction of unfamiliar perspectives into their discussions with others. Historical patterns of hierarchical control in school systems and emphases on performance, efficiency, and economic values over more social-democratic ones posed significant challenges to the more desirable democratic forms of interaction (Begley and Johansson, 2003; Bottery, 2001; Starratt, 2003).

One principal described this tension in the following way:

> Instructional leadership is being defined differently now. It's more of a technological type of thing like what to do to make the test scores higher as opposed to how to set up a learning environment, based on, for example, multiple intelligences, addressing the diversity of the learners in the classroom. I think it's become a much more production-oriented definition of instructional leadership. I think it's just happening as a function of the school movement towards standardization. It's very management oriented and not really focused on the kid and their needs and strengths.

Many principals and parent advocates were able to identify specific interactions through which they claimed to have learned more about themselves. Most participants were able to describe the positive influence that empathetic listening had on the relationships they were trying to foster with others. Parent advocates referred to principals who spent time listening to their personal stories of past struggles.

As one parent advocate noted:

> I really appreciated one principal in particular, who let me know he was putting forth the effort to understand my perspective. He told me that he tried to gain more information by asking what he thought were non-threatening kinds of questions like, "tell me your understanding of this problem", and, "what might I be able to do for you?"

They acknowledged that they, in turn, improved in their own efforts to better demonstrate empathetic listening skills, although in certain circumstances, they also learned tolerance when this form of communication was absent in some conversations with particular principals. Many of the principals highlighted how much they appreciated and respected differences in people and their opinions, and further claimed that this shaped their responses to apparent verbal abuse from particular parents. They claimed that their own responses to conflicted interactions afforded them further insights into their own capacities for empathy as well as their threshold for discourteous remarks from parents.

One principal emphasized the importance of attending to this notion of empathy in the interactions:

> It seems to me that in our efforts to approach special education program and placement meetings in a business like fashion, we run the risk of missing the human element, and the depth of the heartfelt aspect of it comes through loud and clear through the parents. There is obviously a personal pain attached to the process itself that tends to get overlooked or misunderstood.

Most principals and parent advocates offered detailed accounts of incidents that demonstrated the development of their knowledge of self and appreciation for those with whom they were interacting. For instance, four principals described how their conflict-resolution training had helped them to remain calm and emotionally detached during more heated debates with parent advocates, yet they became familiar with their own emotional thresholds and could become very anger and frustrated when aggravated.

As one principal described it:

> Part of the frustration and anger comes from your sense of failure to accomplish good for this family. How do you always get a parent to listen? This one parent . . . I felt like I needed to get at her with a two by four. I was so frustrated by her refusal to listen to anything we had to say. She wanted him demitted from special education, but I knew he'd die without support going to high school. It's tough going sometimes. Emotions complicate things. That's why you have to try to separate the personal and the emotional from the professional dialogue.

And at the same time, you want to recognize someone's pain, so where do you draw the line and move back into discussing the issues in a more calm and rational manner?

Similarly, five parent advocates maintained that notwithstanding their advocacy training that had emphasized calmness and rationality in even the most heated discussions, they too could become viscerally upset when they felt others were devaluing their perspectives.

One parent advocate expressed it in the following way:

> I know how hard it was for me as a parent through my own experiences to leave emotion out of it but we as advocates still try to coach parents to remain calm, cool, keep a sense of humour, smile, nod and so on. All too often, I've seen emotions viewed as a sign of weakness and unprofessionalism by principals.

It is the position of many scholars interested in values and ethics that the development of self-knowledge and the appreciation of others can support a greater sensitivity and understanding to the value orientations and practices of others (e.g. Begley, 1999, 2001; Begley and Johansson, 2003; Starratt, 2003; Stefkovich and Poliner Shapiro, 2003). Research has demonstrated that this form of reflective practice is best supported in schools where there is a pre-existing culture of inclusion that focuses on the assessment of meaningful goals for education in a democratic environment (Ballard, 1999; Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Burrello *et al.*, 2001; Ryan, 2003). Understandably, it appears that a necessary prerequisite for this involves having parents and principals believe that the education of each and every student is equally important (Biklen, 1987; Giangreco, 1997).

A political perspective
All principals maintained that the parent advocates' concerns and interests for children with disabilities had a legitimate place in administrative decision making. They claimed that they valued parent advocates' focus on the individual needs of children with disabilities, yet did not necessarily support the more politicized forms of parent advocacy involving collective activities and organized lobbying, and often questioned its appropriateness at the local school level. However, most of the principals were in agreement with all the parent advocates in this study that the local parent-school arena had invariably become a more political one, and that it was necessary to address the individual needs of children along with the larger political goals of organizations with which schools forged partnerships.

One principal provided an example of how she addressed both the personal and professional aspects of advocacy-oriented interactions:

> I had an incident where I phoned an advocate and said to her, I need you to come in and give us some support. I have some concerns for the parent who I feel is vulnerable and needs support from outside of the school. I sort of turned it around and called the advocate to help resolve an issue before the advocate was called in by the parent. I know the parent valued this action as did the advocate. It is important to seek out support from each other

and others beyond the school who may have the knowledge and expertise and resources
that you lack.

Although all participants gave considerable thought to the apparent bipartisan
nature of advocacy, only two principals were able to describe experiences
where they perceived children were "used" to further an organizational end.
This is illustrated in one principal's comment:

> I'm thinking of a particular mother who was clearly a political advocate. You know, let's
> adopt a child to fit my cause. The advocate wants her 15 minutes of fame to go to the top.
> Sometimes, the kid and his or her needs are not at the heart of the problem, but we always
> need to remember to come back to this common ground of focusing on and helping the
> child.

Most acknowledged, in one way or another, the challenges and complexities of
trying to keep the interests of children and their organizations separate.

Individual versus collective needs

Most principals expressed their concern with some parent advocates' solitary
focus on the individual needs of the students they were representing without
regard for other students' needs in the school.
As one principal described it:

> You see the reality from what I've seen here is *me, me, me*! A parent has said to me, I don't
> care that there are 30 other children in his classroom. My child needs this and I'm demanding
> that he gets this, and then he name drops all the people he's connected with politically and
> legally, and lets me know he'll continue to go over my head as required to get what he needs
> for his kid.

On a similar note, another principal claimed:

> There are many parents defining themselves as advocates but they are not. Their role is not
> demonstrated as collaborative. It's more of demand and insistence for their own child and not
> for their cause. It's an attitude of I don't care about anyone else in the system. That's not a
> positive advocacy like other parents who advocated for their own children, and through that,
> learned how to systematically advocate for others like their own children.

This finding is largely consistent with both Kalyanpur and Harry's (1999) and
Vincent's (2000) work which highlighted that parental attitudes tend to remain
focused on particular children without regard for the collective good of other
children in the school. These researchers found, however, that once parents
were able to achieve desired outcomes for their own children, they were
subsequently likely to develop a further interest in supporting other parents
with similar struggles in schools. Evidence from this study suggests that it was
these perceptions about self-interest and the collective good that may have
inhibited the fostering of trust, respect, and understanding for differences
across perspectives among principals and parent advocates, and subsequently
contributed to their conflicted interactions.

Conceptual and practical incongruities relating to disability and inclusion

Conceptualizations of disability and special education were typically found to be manifested through either scientific or social/holistic constructions of knowledge. The data collected from parent advocates and principals indicated that the most popular understandings of disability and special education remained embedded in the scientific/medical model of "deficit training". From this standpoint, disability arises from pathological deficiencies or the physical and mental inability to perform so-called "normal" tasks as assessed through medical standards or measurements of standardized functioning (Skrtic, 1995). More often than not, remediation efforts from a deficit perspective remain the focus of school personnel and parents' efforts in their interactions.

The scientific/medical model of disability

All participants in this study believed that people's action in resolving a problematic issue was, for the most part, driven by their individualized understandings of the problem. For example, if principals or parent advocates identified special needs problems as residing within students, then they were also defining the problem with a more scientific conceptualization of disability or deviance. Their proposed interventions, then, were driven by the knowledge that they acquired from the application of a diagnostic-prescriptive methodology (Burrello *et al.*, 2001; Clark *et al.*, 1998; Thomas and Loxley, 2001; Tomlinson, 1995).

Two parent advocates and four principals had this basic deficit driven understanding of disability. These participants recounted numerous stories about special education meetings that included descriptions of symptoms associated with different disabilities, scientific understandings of what causes disabilities, and the need to intervene in the best interests of students with special needs.

One principal offered this interpretation:

> Parents need support because they often start from a deficit position. They don't know what's wrong with their kid, so it's the initial search for what was wrong and then what can we do to fix it? Maybe it's tied to medicine and science, I don't know but as we learn more and more about different things and the possible ramification and effects of certain conditions, we can better plan how to meet the student's needs. There has, I guess been an occasion . . . it was the climate at the time, or the time for that particular deficiency or diagnosed thing to get its opportunity and be recognized.

A parent advocate emphasized the role science has played in furthering her understanding of disability and educational programming:

> We're learning more and more through brain research how to intervene and how best to remediate weaknesses and offer the students some really good compensatory strategies.

In their stories they showed a preference for emphasizing the application of this knowledge to areas of appropriate programming for special needs students, the identification of exceptionalities, and placement decisions.

The social/holistic model of disability
Five parent advocates and two principals appeared to adopt a more social/holistic approach to intervention. Though they described similar disabilities as their "scientific" counterparts, they did not speak in terms of "symptoms". Their choice of words was especially telling, focusing on students' "strengths" and "needs" in their descriptions rather than "problems". They chose to rely far less on scientific/medical knowledge for program and placement decisions, as they said that they feared the possible repercussions of stigmatizing and excluding students.

These participants appeared to place far more emphasis on socially created aspects of disability and tended to view special needs as more of a manifestation of human differences rather than a lack of any functional capabilities. From their viewpoint, disabilities did not result from exclusively physical or mental limitations. Although these parent advocates and principals claimed that they did not deny the significance of impairment in an individual's life, they preferred to focus on the social structures in schools that they perceived as acting as the real barriers to inclusion and quality programming for children with disabilities.

One principal emphasized the need to refocus dialogue in special education meetings on how best to change structures in the school to accommodate the learner:

> I like to see the focus of our in-school team meetings for our students who are struggling on ways in which we can change the environment to support the learner's needs and strengths. We prefer to examine strategies, accommodations, modifications, and other supports to help the students learn. We look at changing some of our current practices to accommodate the learner. Otherwise, we're left to label, sort, and exclude those considered different and different in how they learn.

A parent advocate provided a concrete example of such an accommodation:

> I went to the teacher and principal to tell them my daughter wasn't hearing the math answers being called out and one of the things they might consider doing is writing the answers down on an overhead transparency. My daughter is an independent kid and we need to foster that independence. She doesn't need an educational assistant leaning over her shoulder writing down the answers for her.

Furthermore, these participants asserted that a primary source of conflicted interactions is the insistence of many school professionals to hold fast to a clinical orientation that concentrates on apparent causes of disability and dubiously appropriate interventions when dealing with problems viewed as residing within students themselves.

Although the parent advocates and principals in this study varied in their individualized understandings of disability, all made reference to changing aspects of the educational environment to meet the needs of students, rather than to continue down the same path of trying only to modify the functional characteristics of students. They supported the development of more inclusive learning environments as an essential and fundamental component of this process. All participants wanted to see more of an emphasis placed on the child in relation to his or her learning environment. In their view, this would demand a more critical examination of the structural features of a school (e.g. timetabling, room assignments, teacher assignments, etc.) that might be impeding student learning and growth.

Competing conceptions of an inclusive education
Views about inclusion varied among the parent advocates and principals in this study. Differences in their perspectives reflected the unique characteristics of their respective organizations and educational institutions. Moreover, they all had their own critical incidents and anecdotal stories that appeared to have influenced these differing perspectives.

Ironically, there does not appear to be any precise legal definition of inclusion or inclusive education. Kerzner-Lipsky and Gartner, (1997, p. 99) offer the following tentative definition based on extensive consultation with educational leaders through the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI):

> [...] providing to all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society.

This definition of inclusion is consistent with the promulgated mission statements of five of the advocacy organizations. They argued that partial integration necessitates partial segregation. These participants did not define full inclusion or integration in terms of any particular program or placement. It was viewed as a way of being and doing, a sense of full acceptance and belonging in a regular education classroom alongside their typical peers regardless of differences.

One parent advocate emphasized the need to think about exit outcomes for students when attempting to resolve differences of opinion on what constitutes authentic inclusion in schools:

> Parents have to remember that it doesn't really matter what the test says. What matters is helping principals and the school community see that just being integrated, as we are in the world, means when our kids get out of school, they've got to function in the normal world, they can't be in a segregated life. It doesn't work that way. And if they're segregated throughout school, then they're going to get to the workplace and not be able to function properly. If principals are more accepting of this, then they're helping to provide for it and realizing that the person who might be cleaning up the table at McDonald's is appropriate

both behaviourally and in their job and socially and all because they had an integrated opportunity at school. So what if they didn't get the credits!

The other two parent advocates and their respective organizations adopt a broader definition of inclusion in their definitions. They felt that it was very important to look at students individually and their unique needs and strengths. According to these participants, special education classrooms in schools with teachers knowledgeable in instruction for particular exceptionalities might be the most enabling environment for certain students with disabilities. Moreover, they steadfastly maintained that regular education classrooms and schools cannot possibly be an "all services provider" for every student. Principals were also of the opinion that a range of placement options continue to be made available to meet the needs of students with disabilities in today's schools.

One parent advocate explained her organization's position:

We do not believe all our children's needs can be best met in the larger classroom. They need specialized supports and services. They need smaller class sizes to secure more individualized attention and to be able to concentrate better.

A principal offered her personal definition of inclusive governance:

I truly believe I can run an inclusive school where every kid feels like he or she belongs, has friends, participates in all kinds of school activities, and may still be in a self-contained behaviour class or LD class. That doesn't mean we're not being inclusive.

These participants appeared to support a more institutional perspective on inclusive schooling:

[. . .] a diverse problem-solving organization with a common mission that emphasizes learning for all students. It employs and supports teachers and staff who are committed to working together to create and maintain a climate conducive to learning. The responsibility for all students is shared. An effective, inclusive school acknowledges that such a commitment requires administrative leadership, on-going technical assistance, and long-term professional development. Within inclusive schools, there is a shared responsibility for any problem or any success for students in the schools (Kerzner-Lipsky and Gartner, 1997, p. 99).

All participants in this study agreed with an identification and placement regulation that the regular education classroom should always be given first consideration. All principals and two of the seven parent advocates believed that both regular education classrooms and special education classrooms within schools could still be considered inclusive learning environments.

Implications for school leadership practice
Findings from this study indicate that social responses as well as leadership practices need to be re-examined in terms of how they conceptualize disability, special education, inclusion, and parent involvement in decision making. Evidence suggests that receptivity to alternative ways of knowing and doing in special education can promote deconstructions of both assumed scientific

objective truths and perceived subjective truths relating to disability and special education.

Re-examining conceptions of disability

Special education provides a unique opportunity to develop a critique of contemporary understandings of disability and new social realities in schools. The findings in this study strongly support the argument for making space in schools for critical dialogue on an inquiry-based culture. There are key questions that need further interrogation to probe participants' understandings and analyses of medical, psychological, and socio-political definitions of "normal" and "abnormal". What are principals' and parents' understandings and analyses of medical, psychological, political and socio-cultural definitions of disability? What are the implications for their interactions of conceiving of disability as a social, cultural and political phenomenon rather than holding to a medical/deviance perspective? Why and how is a deficit model in special education validated and promoted? Why and how are its more inclusive alternatives devalued and negated? All the participants in this study emphasized that this form of interrogation inevitably presented them with more challenges and, at times even conflicts. However, participants agreed that it had been a necessary prerequisite for the creation of more participatory dialogue and decision-making among parents and principals.

Prevailing special education discourses reconsidered

The results of this study also imply a need for the identification and examination of various discourses used in special education. As many parent advocates and principals in this study pointed out, the rights and ethics discourse, asserts that students with disabilities have the fundamental right to be educated, ideally alongside their non disabled peers in regular education classrooms in their neighbourhood schools. This basic right is grounded in democratic values of fairness, equity, access, and social justice principles (Barton, 1996; Biklen, 1987; Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Giangreco, 1997; Skrtic, 1995). To be sure, there are no shortage of scholars who claim that a rights and ethics discourse is derived from structuralist analyses that perpetuate societal inequalities in education institutions (Benhabib, 1996; Skrtic, 1995; Tomlinson, 1995; Young, 1996). When applied to special education practices, this critique asserts that segregated learning environments and dual systems of regular and special education, continue to privilege certain groups of learners while simultaneously marginalizing and excluding others.

A medical discourse that emphasizes deviance and deficits continues to promote the further construction and application of tests and criteria that define "normal" and "abnormal". This practice largely determines separate programs and placements for many students with disabilities, and discounts the need to change school and system structures impeding progress towards

equity and access to inclusive and quality learning environments for all students.

One political discourse introduced by many parent advocates is concerned with developing forms of resistance to the status quo. The focus is on the struggle against groups including school systems that have professional interests in preserving the dual and parallel systems of regular and special education. The findings suggest that individual and collective resistance can be enacted in myriad ways in order to create more inclusive educational environments for students and a more inclusive decision-making arena for parents and principals. These inclusion goals involve the interrogation of individuals' and organizations' values and assumptions in special education. The task becomes to make explicit these varied assumptions that can then be evaluated and challenged if necessary, particularly by those who have historically been excluded from sharing their knowledge and perspectives in this arena.

As the complexity of the politics of educational reform increases and as its influence on special education intensifies, we must concern ourselves with scholarship and practice that transcend traditional perspectives and examine how principals and parent advocates come to know and understand disability and special education. An examination of this personal and professional knowledge base warrants a more focused consideration of the relationships between disability, democracy, and the necessary reconstruction of special education (Thomas and Loxley, 2001). The adoption of such a critical approach to the study of educational leadership and special education can help to balance the tensions and conflicts in parent advocates' and principals' interactions that clearly arise from the dual needs of correcting significant power imbalances in the decision-making arena and maintaining some structures for stability (Foster, 1986; Goeppinger, 2002; Ryan, 2003; Zaretsky, 2003).

From conflict to collaboration
The findings in this study support the need to promote uncertainty and ambiguity in special education as a positive circumstance leading to more collaborative and creative problem solving and decision making. This process can challenge individuals to look beyond their own interests, values, and perspectives that might otherwise get in the way of achieving a mutually satisfying resolution to a problem in special education. There is a need to create dialogical contexts that address diversity and difference in person and opinion if more inclusive public spaces in schools are to be created for students with disabilities and their parents. To be sure, there is no shortage of scholars who argue that school stakeholders should listen carefully to interpretations that differ in fundamental ways from their own. It is essential for principals and parent advocates to courageously confront unfamiliar and uncomfortable ideas and situations (Begley and Johansson, 2003: Burrello *et al.*, 2001; Murphy, 2000;

Poliner-Shapiro and Gross, 2002; Ryan, 2003). At the very least, this critically reflective interactive practice has the potential to promote the overarching shared goals of providing all children with equity and excellence in inclusive education and re-conceptualizing parent involvement in the decision-making processes.

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