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Building inclusive learning communities: the collaborative role of parents and school leaders in supporting students with additional needs

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is widely endorsed as a policy priority; however, less is known about how school leaders practically enable collaboration with parents to support inclusive schooling. This qualitative study examines how secondary school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education across four national contexts: Australia, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with ten secondary school principals, the study adopts Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice framework to analyse collaboration as a leadership-mediated, relational process. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that effective collaboration was actively produced through leadership practices that fostered mutual engagement, negotiated shared purpose, and institutionalised collaborative routines. Across contexts, leaders played a central role in aligning parental aspirations with school capacities, mediating tensions related to inclusion, and creating structures that supported sustained parent involvement. While national policy environments shaped the form collaboration took, common processes of relational work, negotiation, and adaptive design were evident. The findings contribute practice-oriented insight into leadership for inclusive education by demonstrating how collaboration with parents is constructed rather than assumed. The study highlights the importance of leadership preparation and policy frameworks that recognise collaboration as complex, negotiated work essential to inclusive schooling.

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Introduction

Inclusive education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right and a key driver of equitable societies. International policy frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), affirm the obligation of education systems to provide inclusive schooling at all levels, emphasising equal access, participation, and opportunity for learners with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,’ signalling a sustained global commitment to inclusive educational provision. Together, these frameworks position inclusive education not as an optional reform, but as a core principle underpinning contemporary schooling systems. Central to the enactment of inclusive education is collaboration between schools and families (Hornby, 2011; Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010; Mitchell, 2018). Parents are often the primary advocates for children with additional needs and bring critical knowledge of their children’s strengths, challenges, and aspirations. School leaders, in turn, hold formal authority and responsibility for shaping school cultures, allocating resources, and establishing structures that support inclusive practices (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Ryan, 2016). Research consistently demonstrates that strong parent—school partnerships are associated with improved student engagement, wellbeing, behaviour, and learning outcomes, particularly for students with disabilities and additional support needs (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2020; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Hornby, 2011; Povey et al., 2016). As such, collaboration between parents and school leaders is widely acknowledged as a foundational condition for inclusive schooling (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Spratt, 2013; UNESCO, 1994).

Despite this broad consensus, the practical enactment of inclusive education remains uneven. A persistent challenge lies in the gap between inclusive education policy and school-level practice (Ydesen & Andersen, 2020). Although many education systems have formally endorsed inclusion (Norwich, 2022; Slee, 2011; UNESCO, 1994), schools frequently encounter barriers when translating policy commitments into everyday practices. These barriers include limited professional preparation for inclusive leadership, constrained resources, competing accountability demands, and enduring deficit-oriented views of disability (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Research on teacher—parent collaboration further indicates that, even where inclusive policies are well established, schools often struggle to meet the complex and diverse needs of students in inclusive settings (McGhie-Richmond & Haider, 2020). While existing scholarship has established the importance of inclusive leadership and parent—school collaboration as separate areas of inquiry (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Theoharis, 2010), there remains limited empirical insight into how school leaders practically enable, structure, and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education. Much of the literature focuses on the benefits or characteristics of collaboration, rather than the leadership practices through which such collaboration is enacted, negotiated, and maintained—particularly within secondary school contexts and across different national policy environments (Artiles et al., 2006; Liasidou, 2023). As a result, there is a need for research that moves beyond normative claims about collaboration to examine the concrete leadership actions that support collaborative partnerships for inclusion.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how secondary school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents to support inclusive education for students with additional needs across four national contexts: Australia, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. Drawing on qualitative data from school leaders working in highly inclusive secondary schools, the study foregrounds leadership practice as the analytic focus, positioning collaboration with parents as a key mechanism through which inclusive education is pursued. By exploring leadership practices across diverse policy and cultural contexts, this study aims to contribute nuanced, practice-oriented insights into how inclusive collaboration is enabled at the school level.

Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do secondary school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education?
- (2) What leadership practices are used to negotiate challenges and tensions in parent—school collaboration for inclusion?
- (3) How do national policy and contextual conditions shape school leaders' approaches to collaboration with parents?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to deepen understanding of leadership for inclusive education and to inform policy and practice aimed at strengthening collaborative partnerships between schools and families.

Inclusive education and the role of school leadership

Inclusive education is widely endorsed as an approach that seeks to ensure equitable access, participation, and achievement for all students, regardless of ability, disability, or background (Ainscow et al., 2006; Woodcock et al., 2022). International policy frameworks, including the Salamanca Statement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and Sustainable Development Goal 4, position inclusion as a core responsibility of education systems worldwide. Collectively, these frameworks emphasise that inclusive schooling is not merely about placement in mainstream settings, but about creating learning environments that respond to learner diversity through systemic, relational, and pedagogical change (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006, 2023). While these global commitments establish a normative foundation for inclusive education, their enactment depends heavily on school-level leadership. School leaders play a critical role in interpreting policy mandates, allocating resources, shaping school culture, and establishing structures that enable inclusive practice. Research consistently demonstrates that leadership practices influence the extent to which inclusive values are embedded within schools, particularly through the development of collaborative cultures that engage families as partners rather than peripheral stakeholders (AITSL, 2020; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Povey et al., 2016).

Parent–school collaboration as a mechanism for inclusion

Meaningful collaboration between parents and schools is widely recognised as a cornerstone of inclusive education (Epstein, 2001; Hornby, 2011; Turnbull et al.,

2006). Parents bring intimate knowledge of their children's needs, histories, and aspirations, while schools contribute professional expertise and access to institutional resources (Turnbull et al., 2006). When these forms of knowledge are brought together through sustained collaboration, students with additional needs are more likely to experience belonging, continuity of support, and positive educational outcomes (AITSL, 2020; Hornby, 2011). However, collaboration does not emerge organically. Research highlights that effective parent—school partnerships require intentional leadership practices, including the creation of structured opportunities for dialogue, transparent communication, and shared decision-making processes (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Povey et al., 2016). At the same time, collaboration is often characterised by tensions arising from power asymmetries, differing expectations, and systemic constraints, particularly in relation to disability, access to resources, and accountability pressures (McGhie-Richmond & Haider, 2020). These dynamics underscore the importance of examining how school leaders actively mediate, negotiate, and sustain collaboration with parents in inclusive contexts, rather than assuming collaboration as a static or universally positive condition.

National policy contexts shaping leadership and collaboration

Although inclusive education is supported by international frameworks, its implementation varies considerably across national and regional contexts. These variations shape both leadership practice and the conditions under which parent—school collaboration occurs. The following sections briefly outline the inclusive education landscapes in Australia, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany, with particular attention to how policy frameworks position parental involvement and leadership responsibility.

Australia

Australia's commitment to inclusive education is underpinned by legislative and policy frameworks that explicitly foreground consultation and collaboration with parents. The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005) require schools to make reasonable adjustments in consultation with students and their families, positioning parents as active participants in decision-making processes (Australian Government, 1992, 2005). State-level policies, such as Queensland's Inclusive Education Policy, further emphasise parental engagement as integral to effective inclusion (Queensland Government, 2021). Empirical research in the Australian context highlights the central role of school leadership in fostering productive parent—school partnerships. Studies indicate that principals' communication practices, relational approaches, and commitment to inclusive values significantly shape parental trust and engagement (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Povey et al., 2016). National frameworks such as the Family—School Partnerships Framework and the Parent and Family Engagement Implementation Guide provide schools with strategies to structure collaboration, yet their enactment remains contingent on leadership capacity and school culture (Australian Government, 2024; Barker & Harris, 2020). These findings suggest that leadership practices are pivotal in translating policy expectations for collaboration into lived inclusive practice.

Italy

Italy is often cited as a pioneer of inclusive education, having formally abolished segregated schooling through legislation beginning in the 1970s (Law 118/1971; Law 517/1977). Subsequent legislation, particularly Law 104/1992, reinforced the right of students with disabilities to be educated in mainstream settings and emphasised shared responsibility among schools, families, and communities (Ianes et al., 2020). Research on inclusive education in Italy documents both positive outcomes and enduring challenges. While inclusive placement is well established, studies highlight ongoing tensions related to teacher preparedness, reliance on medicalised understandings of disability, and variability in inclusive practice across schools (Begeny & Martens, 2007; Ianes et al., 2020). Within this context, parents play a significant role in advocating for support and continuity across schooling transitions. School leaders are therefore positioned as key mediators between families, teachers, and external services, tasked with coordinating collaboration in a system where inclusion is structurally mandated but unevenly enacted.

Switzerland

Switzerland's federal education system results in substantial variation in inclusive education policies and practices across cantons (Sahli Lozano et al., 2021). While integrative schooling is legally prioritised under the Disability Equality Act (BehiG; Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation, 2004), segregated provision remains prevalent, particularly for students with more extensive support needs (Federal Statistics Office, 2024). Decisions regarding placement often rest with individual schools, placing considerable responsibility on school leaders to navigate inclusion within selective and decentralised systems (Hollenweger, 2016). Collaboration with parents is formally embedded within curricular and policy frameworks such as Lehrplan 21, which mandates information sharing and cooperation between teachers and families (Deutschschweizer Erziehungsdirektoren-Konferenz, 2014). However, research points to gaps in teacher preparation for inclusive practice, complicating collaborative efforts with families (Sahli Lozano et al., 2024). In this context, school leaders play a critical role in structuring parental involvement through councils, meetings, and informal engagement strategies, while also managing tensions arising from selection processes and limited system capacity.

Germany

Germany's approach to inclusive education is shaped by a highly decentralised federal structure, resulting in marked disparities across states (Lee, 2021). Although the ratification of the UN-CRPD in 2009 signalled a formal commitment to inclusion, segregated schooling remains widespread, with less than half of students identified as having special educational needs educated in inclusive settings (Lepper & Steinmann, 2024). Research on inclusive leadership in Germany remains limited, particularly with respect to school leaders' engagement with parents (Kullmann et al., 2014). Existing

studies suggest that school leaders often face the complex task of negotiating parental expectations, especially when families seek inclusive placements that may exceed system capacity or available resources (Scheer, 2020). These dynamics position collaboration not as a straightforward partnership, but as an ongoing process of negotiation shaped by structural constraints, parental advocacy, and contested understandings of inclusion.

Synthesis and implications for the present study

Across these national contexts, inclusive education is consistently framed as a policy priority, yet its enactment is mediated by local conditions, leadership practices, and relational dynamics with parents (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Ydesen & Andersen, 2020). While collaboration is widely promoted, the literature reveals limited empirical attention to the specific leadership practices through which collaboration is enabled, sustained, and negotiated in inclusive secondary school settings (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). This gap is particularly evident in cross-national research that examines how policy environments shape leadership approaches to parent—school collaboration (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Lambrecht et al., 2020; Povey et al., 2016). Responding to this gap, the present study foregrounds school leadership practice as the analytic lens through which collaboration with parents for inclusive education is examined. By drawing on data from secondary school leaders working in highly inclusive contexts across four countries, the study seeks to illuminate how collaboration is actively constructed, rather than assumed, within diverse educational systems.

Theoretical framework: communities of practice and leadership for inclusive collaboration

This study draws on Wenger's (1998) theory of Communities of Practice (CoP) to conceptualise how school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education. Rather than treating collaboration as a static condition or assumed good, the CoP framework enables an examination of collaboration as a socially negotiated practice, shaped by leadership action, shared purpose, and contextual constraints. This perspective aligns with the study's focus on leadership practices that actively enable, structure, and mediate parent—school collaboration within inclusive secondary school settings. Wenger (1998) defines a Community of Practice as a group of individuals who engage collectively in a process of learning through shared practice. Central to this framework are three interrelated dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Together, these dimensions offer an analytical lens for understanding how collaboration is produced through interaction, negotiation, and the development of shared meanings and practices over time.

Communities of practice in inclusive education

Inclusive education requires coordinated effort among multiple stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, parents, and external professionals. From a CoP perspective, schools can be understood as sites where inclusion is not simply implemented through

policy compliance, but co-constructed through ongoing relational and organisational work. In this sense, collaboration for inclusion is a dynamic process, contingent on leadership practices that bring stakeholders into sustained engagement around shared educational goals. Previous research has demonstrated the value of CoP in inclusive education contexts, particularly in illuminating how parents and educators collaboratively construct knowledge, design support strategies, and respond to students' diverse needs (Mortier et al., 2010). This study highlights that effective inclusion emerges through situated learning processes rather than through predetermined roles or fixed procedures. Building on this work, the present study applies the CoP framework to examine how school leaders facilitate and shape these collaborative processes at the secondary school level.

Operationalising the CoP framework in this study

In this study, Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of Communities of Practice are used to guide both data analysis and interpretation, with particular attention to the role of school leadership in enabling collaboration with parents. Mutual engagement refers to the ways in which school leaders create and sustain opportunities for meaningful interaction with parents. This includes leadership practices such as establishing regular forums for dialogue, encouraging informal contact, and fostering relational trust. Rather than assuming engagement, the analysis examines how leaders actively invite, structure, and maintain parental participation in inclusive decision-making processes. Joint enterprise captures the negotiated nature of shared goals within inclusive schooling. While inclusive education is often framed as a common objective, parents and schools may hold differing expectations regarding academic pathways, support needs, and definitions of success. Within this study, joint enterprise is understood as the ongoing work undertaken by school leaders to align these perspectives, mediate tensions, and negotiate collective commitments to inclusion within the constraints of policy, resources, and institutional capacity (AITSL, 2020). Shared repertoire refers to the material, symbolic, and procedural resources that support collaboration over time. In inclusive education contexts, this includes shared language around inclusion, formal structures such as parent councils or meetings, documentation such as individual education plans, and routines that normalise parent involvement. The analysis attends to how school leaders develop, adapt, and mobilise these shared resources to sustain collaborative practice across diverse national settings.

Leadership, power, and negotiation within communities of practice

While the CoP framework emphasises collaboration and shared learning, it also recognises that communities are shaped by power relations, differences in expertise, and uneven access to decision-making authority. In parent—school collaboration, these dynamics are particularly salient. Parents bring experiential and emotional knowledge of their children, while school leaders hold institutional authority and responsibility for policy implementation and resource allocation. Balancing these forms of knowledge requires deliberate leadership practices that acknowledge asymmetries while fostering mutual respect. Research has highlighted that without attention to power and

participation, communities of practice risk reproducing exclusion rather than challenging it (Smith et al., 2017). In inclusive education, this underscores the importance of leadership practices that create spaces for parental voice, negotiate disagreement, and manage competing expectations without reducing collaboration to persuasion or compliance. Recent work further emphasises that equitable collaboration depends on relational trust, transparency, and the recognition of diverse stakeholder contributions (Vlcek & Somerton, 2024).

By applying Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice framework, this study conceptualises parent—school collaboration as an active, negotiated, and leadership-mediated process rather than a fixed attribute of inclusive schools. The framework provides a structured lens for analysing how collaboration is enacted across different national contexts, while remaining sensitive to local policy conditions, cultural norms, and systemic constraints. In doing so, it supports a nuanced examination of leadership practices that enable inclusion not simply through policy alignment, but through sustained relational work with parents.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how secondary school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited to investigating leadership practice, as they allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, decision-making processes, and contextual constraints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the study's focus on understanding how collaboration is enabled and negotiated in practice, semi-structured group interviews were selected as the primary data collection method. Group interviews enabled school leaders to articulate their perspectives, reflect on shared experiences, and respond to one another's accounts, thereby generating rich, contextualised insights into leadership practices for inclusive collaboration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach was particularly appropriate for capturing the relational and negotiated dimensions of collaboration foregrounded in the study's theoretical framework. Secondary schools were selected as the focus of this study because the nature of parent—school collaboration differs meaningfully from that in primary or early childhood settings; at the secondary level, students are navigating greater academic complexity, subject specialisation, and preparation for post-school pathways, which shapes both the form and focus of leadership-mediated collaboration with families.

Sampling and participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify information-rich cases that could provide in-depth insight into leadership practices for inclusive education (Patton, 2015). Rather than aiming for representativeness, the study focused on secondary school leaders working in schools recognised for their commitment to inclusive education, where collaboration with parents was a sustained and visible feature of practice. The sample comprised ten secondary school principals across four national contexts: Australia, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. The intent was to include multiple

perspectives across diverse policy and cultural environments, while remaining attentive to the contextual specificity of each case. Schools were selected according to the following criteria:

- The school had been formally recognised for its commitment to inclusive education, through education departments, policy alignment, or established institutional partnerships.
- The school enrolled students with a wide range of needs and backgrounds, including students with disabilities, neurodivergence, learning difficulties, and diverse cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic profiles.
- The school had institutional policies and practices that explicitly promoted inclusive education and parent—school collaboration.

Across the sample, schools varied considerably in size (approximately 100 to 2,100 students), socio-economic context, and student demographics, enabling examination of leadership practices across diverse institutional conditions.

Australia

The Australian sample included three secondary school principals from Victoria and Queensland. These schools were recognised by their respective education departments for strong inclusive practices and served diverse student populations, with enrolments ranging from approximately 900 to 2,100 students.

Italy

Three principals from upper secondary schools participated in the Italian context. All schools were technical or vocational in focus, with enrolments between 600 and 900 students. These schools were identified for their established inclusive practices and curricular initiatives designed to support diverse learners.

Switzerland

Three secondary school principals were recruited from different cantons. While the schools were not connected to one another, each had established collaborations with the researchers' institution and was recognised for advancing inclusive education through structured parent engagement and school-wide practices.

Germany

In Germany, one secondary school principal participated. Unlike the other contexts, this case involved an individual interview rather than a group interview, reflecting contextual and logistical constraints. The school was selected as an information-rich case due to its demonstrated commitment to inclusive education in a system where inclusive leadership remains under-researched. This case is treated analytically as a contextualised exemplar rather than a numerically equivalent comparison.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured group interviews with school principals in each national context, with the exception of Germany, where an individual interview was conducted. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were guided by an interview schedule ([Appendix A](#)) designed to elicit detailed accounts of leadership practices related to parent—school collaboration. Interview questions focused on how collaboration was initiated, structured, and sustained; how challenges and tensions were negotiated; and how collaboration supported inclusive education for students with additional needs. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. To enhance credibility, transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, allowing them to review and clarify their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committees, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation of schools and participants, and all data were securely stored.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022): (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) initial code generation, (3) theme development, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) analytic reporting. This approach was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterned meaning across qualitative datasets while remaining sensitive to context and participant voice (Nowell et al., 2017).

Initial coding was conducted inductively to remain grounded in participants' accounts of leadership practice. These codes were then examined through the lens of the Communities of Practice framework, with particular attention to how leadership practices reflected processes of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. This abductive analytic approach enabled the integration of theory without imposing predefined categories on the data. Throughout the analysis, the research team engaged in iterative discussion and reflexive dialogue to interrogate interpretations, enhance analytic rigour, and ensure coherence between emerging themes and the study's conceptual framework. Theme development proceeded across the full dataset rather than within national cases, so that each candidate theme was required to hold across at least two contexts or to be retained explicitly as a point of contrast. Coding was undertaken independently by two members of the research team and compared; divergences were resolved through discussion rather than by calculating agreement, consistent with the reflexive orientation of the approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes were then tested against each research question in turn, and sub-themes were retained only where they were supported by extracts from more than one participant. The resulting structure is reported in [Table 1](#) and organises the Findings section that follows.

Findings

The findings are presented thematically rather than by national context. In the previous version of the manuscript, findings were organised country by country, which

Table 1. Overview of themes, sub-themes and their relationship to the research questions.

Theme	Sub-themes	Research question addressed	National contexts represented
1. Producing the conditions for collaboration: leadership as relational architecture	1.1 Establishing the relationship before it is needed; 1.2 Braiding formal structure with informal access; 1.3 Positioning parents as knowledge-holders and co-designers	RQ1	Australia, Italy, Switzerland, Germany
2. Holding difference: negotiating aspiration, expertise and dissent	2.1 Reframing advocacy and distress as legitimate participation; 2.2 Questioning rather than persuading; 2.3 Attending to variation in family readiness without deficit framing; 2.4 Consensus as slow, repeated work	RQ2	Australia, Italy, Germany
3. Collaboration held and constrained by systems	3.1 Codified collaboration and cultural settlement; 3.2 Selection and scarcity as generators of tension; 3.3 When collaboration is subsidised by families; 3.4 Turning collaboration outward toward advocacy	RQ3	Switzerland, Germany

foregrounded contextual description at the expense of analytic development. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) generated three themes, each comprising several sub-themes, and each addressing one of the study's research questions. Data from all four national contexts are represented within each theme, so that comparison occurs inside the analysis rather than after it. Where a practice was distinctive to a single system, this is stated explicitly and treated as a point of contrast rather than as a deficiency in the dataset. Table 1 summarises the thematic structure and its relationship to the research questions.

Extracts are presented verbatim; Italian and German extracts are translations, and ellipses indicate material omitted for concision. Following Braun and Clarke (2022), extracts are used illustratively and analytically, that is, to evidence the claim being made and to carry part of the interpretive work.

Theme 1: producing the conditions for collaboration—leadership as relational architecture

The first theme addresses Research Question 1 and concerns how collaboration was brought into being and kept in being. Across all four contexts, leaders described collaboration as something they had to construct and then maintain, rather than something that followed automatically from parental interest or from policy requirement. Three sub-themes capture the leadership practices through which this construction occurred: establishing relationships in advance of difficulty, braiding formal structures with informal access, and positioning parents as holders of knowledge rather than recipients of information.

Establishing the relationship before it is needed

Leaders in Australia and Italy consistently located the beginning of collaboration at the point of enrolment or transition, well before any specific support decision was required. This timing was described as deliberate. An Australian leader connected early goal-setting with parents to the longer arc of a student's schooling:

Finding ways for students to have positive experiences in school helps them succeed later in life, and this requires working closely with parents to set realistic goals and expectations.

The extract is notable for what it makes conditional. Positive experience at school is presented as an outcome that depends on prior negotiation with parents about what is realistic. The leadership work described is anticipatory: expectations are calibrated jointly at the outset so that later decisions are made within an already-agreed frame rather than in the middle of a dispute. Collaboration here is a form of front-loading, and its purpose is to reduce the likelihood of later rupture.

Italian leaders described a structurally similar practice, but attached it to system transitions rather than to enrolment interviews. One leader traced the continuity of contact across the movement from lower to upper secondary schooling:

Contacts that began . . . at this moment of encounter between the middle secondary school and the upper secondary school . . . it is a common thread that we are able to follow vertically along the entire path.

The metaphor of a common thread followed vertically is analytically significant. It positions the school leader not as the originator of the relationship with the family but as its custodian across an institutional boundary at which relationships are ordinarily lost. Where the Australian account emphasised establishing a relationship, the Italian account emphasised inheriting and protecting one. Both, however, treat the timing of contact as a leadership decision rather than an administrative accident. [FURTHER EXTRACT].

This sub-theme provides a direct answer to the first research question: collaboration was enacted through the deliberate scheduling of relationship-building at moments when nothing was yet at stake, which leaders across both systems described as the condition that made later negotiation possible.

Braiding formal structure with informal access

A second and closely related practice concerned the combination of scheduled, minuted contact with continuous, low-threshold contact. Leaders did not treat these as alternatives. An Italian leader described the two operating simultaneously:

There are about 2–3 structured meetings during the year . . . but informally there is constant communication.

The conjunction carries the analytic weight. The structured meetings supply accountability, documentation and a predictable point of review; the informal channel supplies responsiveness between those points. Leaders described the second as the mechanism through which support plans could be adjusted without waiting for the next formal review, which matters particularly for students whose needs fluctuate within a school year.

Swiss leaders described an institutional version of the same logic, in which informality was itself scheduled:

An ‘open-door week’ where parents can visit classrooms without prior registration.

Removing prior registration is a small procedural change with a substantive effect: it converts parental presence in the school from an event that must be requested and granted into a default entitlement. The leader's framing suggests an intention to normalise presence rather than to manage it, and to distribute access to parents who may lack the confidence or the cultural knowledge to initiate a formal request.

Australian leaders located the same work in the leader's own conduct rather than in a scheduled structure:

I just immersed myself in the school community when I started here, and it is an incredibly inclusive community for students, parents, and staff.

Read alongside the Swiss extract, this account illustrates a contrast that recurs throughout the dataset. In the Swiss case the openness of the school was carried by an institutional device that would persist beyond any individual principal; in the Australian case it was carried by the personal practice of the leader. The two produce comparable relational conditions but differ sharply in durability, a distinction taken up in the Discussion. [FURTHER EXTRACT]

Positioning parents as knowledge-holders and co-designers

The third sub-theme concerns the epistemic status accorded to parents. Leaders across contexts described practices that treated parental knowledge as an input to design rather than as background information. An Australian leader described a school programme that originated in conversation with families:

We collaborated with parents to design a structured recess and lunch program.

Unstructured social time is a well-recognised site of exclusion for students with additional needs, and the extract locates both the identification of that problem and the design of the response in the collaborative relationship. The parental contribution here is not consent to a school-designed intervention but participation in its specification.

An Italian leader articulated the same positioning more explicitly, describing the school's offer as building on work families had already done:

We offer the best possible path . . . but clearly there is an already important path on the part of the family.

The extract sets two paths alongside one another and declines to subordinate the family's to the school's. This is a notably non-hierarchical formulation of expertise in a system where professional judgement is institutionally privileged, and it recurred in Italian accounts of collective parental knowledge held beyond the individual family:

Because usually the families of the students who have diversities are part of associations and groups . . . there is this communication.

Here parental knowledge is described as networked and mobile, circulating through associations that operate independently of the school. Leaders described working with this circulation rather than around it, which positions the school as one node in a wider

information system rather than as its centre. A German leader gave the same insight a collective grammar:

The ‘I’ ... and the ‘we’ concerns not only the children, but also the staff and the parents.

The extract extends the school’s constitutive ‘we’ to include parents as members rather than as external stakeholders consulted by members. Taken together, these four extracts indicate that the recognition of parental expertise was not confined to systems with strong participatory traditions, but was articulated in different institutional vocabularies: as co-design in Australia, as parallel pathways in Italy, and as membership in Germany. [FURTHER EXTRACT]

Theme 2: holding difference—negotiating aspiration, expertise and dissent

The second theme addresses Research Question 2 and concerns what leaders did when collaboration became difficult. Disagreement was pervasive across the dataset, and leaders did not describe it as a failure of partnership. Four sub-themes capture the practices through which difference was held rather than resolved: the reframing of advocacy and distress as legitimate participation, the substitution of questioning for persuasion, the treatment of variation in family readiness without recourse to deficit explanation, and the acceptance of consensus as slow and repetitive work.

Reframing advocacy and distress as legitimate participation

Leaders in Australia described working with families whose prior experience of schooling had been unsuccessful, and who arrived at the school in a state of considerable distress:

Some parents have been very distressed because their children were not fitting in traditional schools ... We worked with them to find ways to integrate their children into our programs while still providing support.

The structure of the account is analytically important. Distress is named, attributed to institutional failure elsewhere rather than to the family, and then answered with joint design work. The leader does not describe managing the parent’s emotion; the response to distress is a change to the school’s provision. This inverts the deficit framing that dominates much of the literature on ‘difficult’ parents, in which parental affect is treated as an obstacle to be absorbed.

German leaders described a structurally comparable tension in a very different register, arising from parental aspiration for academic placement:

Parents always want their child in the secondary school, no matter if it is overstrained or not.

This extract is more ambivalent, and warrants careful reading. It expresses evident frustration and carries an implicit professional claim to superior judgement about the student’s capacity. Yet leaders did not act on that claim unilaterally; as the following sub-theme shows, the response was dialogic. The extract is retained here precisely because it demonstrates that the reframing of parental advocacy as

legitimate was not uniform across the dataset. In the Australian accounts, parental persistence was narrated as informed advocacy; in the German account it is narrated as pressure operating against professional assessment. This divergence is not incidental: it maps onto the difference between a system in which placement is largely a matter of school-level negotiation and one in which placement in a stratified system carries substantial and irreversible consequences for a child's future pathway.

Questioning rather than persuading

Where aspiration and professional judgement diverged, leaders described declining to argue. A German leader described the practice as one of returning the question to the parent:

We ask . . . what kind of expectation do I actually have of the child?

The extract is grammatically striking. The leader reports asking a question, but the question is voiced in the parent's own first person, so that the reported speech performs the very shift in perspective the practice is designed to produce. The intended effect is not to secure agreement with the school's assessment but to open the parent's expectation to their own examination. This is a markedly different technology of influence from persuasion, and it distributes the interpretive work rather than concentrating it in the school.

Australian leaders described a parallel move at the level of provision rather than expectation:

Rather than an 'all-in or all-out' approach, we create tailored solutions that work for each student with parental input.

The rejection of the binary is what makes negotiation possible. Where inclusion is specified as full placement or none, the collaborative conversation reduces to a decision on which parties can only agree or disagree. By treating the configuration of support as adjustable, leaders created a space in which disagreement about degree could be worked through incrementally, and in which parental input had somewhere to act. [FURTHER EXTRACT]

Attending to variation in family readiness without deficit framing

Italian leaders spoke at length about differences between families in their understanding of a child's needs, and described this as the principal determinant of how collaboration proceeded:

Families are central to all this, it is their degree of awareness . . . when faced with a [child with] diverse ability.

Awareness is presented here as a variable that organises the collaborative work, not as a threshold that families must cross before collaboration can begin. The consequences of low awareness were named plainly, but they were named alongside an explicit refusal to attribute blame:

The difficulties arise when the families are less aware . . . we fully understand the difficulty in some cases.

The two clauses do distinct work. The first identifies where the professional labour is heaviest; the second withholds the deficit inference that the first invites. Leaders described this as a deliberate stance, and its effect is to convert what could be framed as parental resistance into a description of where the school needs to invest additional relational time. Read against Theme 1, this sub-theme also clarifies why early and continuous contact mattered to Italian leaders: the vertical thread described earlier is the mechanism through which awareness is built over time rather than presumed at the point of entry.

Consensus as slow, repeated work

In systems where parents held formal decision-making authority, leaders described negotiation as protracted. A German leader described the passage of a proposal through the school conference:

We are always dependent on persuasion . . . we have brought the proposal . . . three times before it was accepted.

The specificity of ‘three times’ is what gives the extract its analytic value. It indicates a leadership practice of repeated re-presentation, in which rejection is treated as a stage in a process rather than as a verdict. The word ‘dependent’ is equally telling: it names an asymmetry that runs opposite to the direction assumed in most of the parent—school partnership literature, in which schools are positioned as holding the power that parents must be helped to access. Here the leader is structurally reliant on parental assent, and the leadership work consists of building it slowly rather than exercising authority. This sub-theme therefore answers Research Question 2 by identifying persistence over time, rather than communicative skill in a single encounter, as the practice through which tension was negotiated where governance was genuinely shared. [FURTHER EXTRACT]

Theme 3: collaboration held and constrained by systems

The third theme addresses Research Question 3 and concerns the relationship between national policy conditions and leadership practice. The data indicate that policy did not determine whether collaboration occurred, since sustained collaboration was described in every context. What policy shaped was where collaboration was located, what it was permitted to decide, and who paid for it. Four sub-themes are developed below.

Codified collaboration and cultural settlement

Swiss leaders described parental participation as governed by explicit and binding rules:

Binding guidelines on how to involve parents with the structure of the parents’ council.

The significance of the extract lies in the word ‘binding’. Involvement is not contingent on the disposition of the current leader; it is a standing obligation attached to the role. This is the clearest instance in the dataset of collaboration that has been made independent of individual leadership commitment, and it stands in direct contrast to the Australian account in sub-theme 1.2, in which comparable openness rested on the principal’s personal practice.

Swiss leaders also described inclusion itself as having passed out of dispute:

Inclusion is no longer a contentious issue.

Leaders attributed this settlement to sustained institutional and cultural effort over an extended period rather than to the absence of difficulty. The claim should be read as bounded: as the next sub-theme shows, the same participants described substantial conflict over placement. What appears to have been settled is the principle of inclusion, not its distribution.

Selection and scarcity as generators of tension

Where school systems are stratified, leaders described collaboration colliding with allocation. A Swiss leader described the pressure directly:

It is not always easy . . . every child wants to be in the secondary school.

The tension is structural rather than relational. No amount of relational trust resolves a situation in which demand for a valued placement exceeds supply, and in which the school leader is the agent of a selection decision they did not design. This is where the limits of the Communities of Practice reading become visible, and it is developed further in the Discussion. It also qualifies the settlement described in sub-theme 3.1: inclusion may be uncontested as a principle while remaining contested at every point of allocation.

When collaboration is subsidised by families

The most consequential policy effect identified in the dataset concerned funding. A German leader described an inclusive programme sustained by parental contribution:

At the moment, we have voluntary rhythmic all-day classes, but the parents have to finance them.

Two features of this arrangement warrant attention. First, the provision is voluntary and therefore available only to those who elect it; second, it is parent-financed and therefore available only to those who can pay for it. An inclusive practice delivered on these terms distributes its benefit according to household capacity, which means that the mechanism intended to widen participation simultaneously narrows it. Where the other sub-themes describe policy shaping the form of collaboration, this extract shows policy determining who can participate in it at all, and it is the strongest evidence in the dataset for the study’s claim that school-level leadership cannot on its own deliver equitable inclusion.

Turning collaboration outward towards advocacy

Finally, leaders described directing collaborative relationships beyond the school. The same German leader who described parent-financed provision articulated an ambition to change its funding basis:

My dream is to continue this work . . . and have an all-day school financed by the state.

The extract completes a movement traceable across the German data. Collaboration begins as membership (sub-theme 1.3), proceeds through repeated internal negotiation (sub-theme 2.4), encounters a constraint that internal negotiation cannot lift (sub-theme 3.3), and is then reoriented towards the level at which the constraint is set. Read in this sequence, the aspiration is not rhetorical: it identifies the point at which leaders recognised the boundary of school-level action and began to treat the parent body as a constituency for policy change rather than only as a partner in school-level decision-making. [FURTHER EXTRACT]

Summary of findings

Read across the three themes, the data support three claims. First, collaboration was produced through identifiable leadership practices—anticipatory relationship-building, the braiding of formal and informal contact, and the treatment of parents as holders of design-relevant knowledge—rather than arising from parental interest or policy requirement (Research Question 1). Second, tension was held rather than eliminated, through reframing, questioning in place of persuasion, the refusal of deficit explanation, and persistence across repeated attempts (Research Question 2). Third, national policy conditions did not determine whether collaboration occurred but did determine its location, its authority and its financing, with the Swiss codification of parental involvement and the German reliance on parental contribution representing the two poles of this variation (Research Question 3).

Two cross-cutting contrasts are carried into the Discussion. The first concerns durability: comparable relational conditions were achieved in Australia through the personal practice of leaders and in Switzerland through binding institutional guidelines, with different implications for what survives a change of principal. The second concerns the direction of dependency: German leaders described themselves as dependent on parental assent, an asymmetry that runs counter to the assumptions of much parent—school partnership scholarship and that a Communities of Practice reading brings into view.

Discussion

This study examined how secondary school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education across four national contexts: Australia, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. Drawing on qualitative interview data and guided by Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice framework, the findings illuminate collaboration not as a static feature of inclusive schools, but as an ongoing, leadership-mediated process shaped by relational work, negotiated purpose, and shared practices. While national policy environments influenced the

form collaboration took, common leadership processes were evident across contexts, alongside important tensions that complicate inclusive schooling. The discussion is structured around the three themes reported above, and takes up in particular the two cross-cutting contrasts identified in the summary of findings: the durability of collaborative arrangements, and the direction of dependency between schools and families.

Collaboration as mutual engagement: leadership and relational work

Across all four contexts, collaboration between school leaders and parents was grounded in deliberate efforts to cultivate mutual engagement. Leaders described practices such as early enrolment conversations, sustained informal contact, open-door policies, and community-based initiatives that brought parents into the everyday life of the school. These practices functioned not simply as communication strategies, but as leadership actions aimed at fostering relational trust and shared belonging. From a Communities of Practice perspective, mutual engagement involves more than participation; it requires the creation of conditions under which stakeholders feel recognised, respected, and able to contribute meaningfully (Wenger, 1998). The findings suggest that school leaders played a central role in initiating and sustaining such engagement, particularly in contexts where families had previously experienced exclusion or marginalisation. Consistent with existing research, trust emerged as a foundational condition for collaboration (Hornby, 2011; Hourri et al., 2019), but the present study extends this literature by illustrating how trust was actively built through leadership practices rather than assumed as a precondition.

Negotiating joint enterprise: alignment, mediation, and shared purpose

A second cross-cutting insight concerns the negotiation of joint enterprise—the shared, yet continually renegotiated, commitment to inclusive education. While inclusion was universally endorsed at a policy level, leaders across contexts described the work involved in aligning parental aspirations with institutional capacities, pedagogical judgements, and system constraints. This was particularly evident in discussions of enrolment decisions, academic pathways, and transitions to secondary schooling. Rather than framing parental advocacy or expectations as obstacles, leaders positioned these as legitimate expressions of care and aspiration that required mediation and dialogue. Leadership practices such as structured meetings, reflective questioning, and trial initiatives (e.g. mixed-age groupings or taster sessions) served as mechanisms for negotiating shared goals. This aligns with scholarship emphasising that inclusive education depends on ongoing negotiation rather than consensus (Artiles et al., 2006; Liasidou, 2023). From a CoP lens, joint enterprise is not fixed but emerges through interaction, highlighting the importance of leadership practices that hold space for disagreement while sustaining collective commitment.

Developing shared repertoires: structures that sustain collaboration

The findings also underscore the importance of shared repertoires—the routines, structures, tools, and symbolic practices that stabilise collaboration over time. Across contexts, leaders described formal mechanisms such as parent councils, scheduled review meetings, individual education plans, and specialised programmes, alongside informal practices that normalised parental presence and participation. These shared repertoires enabled collaboration to extend beyond individual relationships and become embedded within school culture. Consistent with research on inclusive leadership, the presence of clear structures and resourcing was critical to sustaining collaboration, particularly in systems characterised by policy complexity or resource scarcity (Lambrecht et al., 2020; Povey et al., 2016). Importantly, the study demonstrates that such structures are not neutral; they are shaped by leadership vision and priorities, and they influence whose voices are heard and how inclusion is enacted in practice.

Power, tension, and the limits of collaboration

While collaboration was widely valued, the findings also reveal inherent tensions related to power, expectations, and systemic constraints. In contexts such as Germany and Switzerland, parental participation in governance structures introduced democratic accountability but also required leaders to navigate competing perspectives and repeated negotiation. Resource limitations, selective schooling structures, and policy ambiguities further complicated collaboration, highlighting that inclusive leadership operates within (and not outside of) structural constraints. These findings resonate with critiques of idealised partnership models that overlook power asymmetries between schools and families (Gross et al., 2015). The study contributes to this literature by showing how leaders actively managed these tensions through transparency, reflexivity, and adaptive practice, rather than through persuasion or compliance. In doing so, collaboration was framed as a process of relational labour that requires time, emotional investment, and institutional support.

Implications for leadership and inclusive practice

Taken together, the findings suggest that effective parent—school collaboration for inclusion depends less on individual goodwill and more on leadership practices that enable mutual engagement, negotiate shared purpose, and institutionalise collaborative routines. Across national contexts, school leaders acted as boundary spanners—mediating between policy demands, parental advocacy, and professional judgement—to sustain inclusive educational pathways. By foregrounding leadership practice, this study advances understanding of how collaboration for inclusion is actively constructed within secondary schools. It also underscores the need for leadership preparation and policy frameworks that recognise collaboration as complex, negotiated work rather than a procedural requirement. Future research could build on these insights by incorporating parental perspectives and observational data to further illuminate the relational dynamics underpinning inclusive schooling.

Continued challenges and future directions

While the findings highlight multiple examples of effective parent—school collaboration, school leaders across all four national contexts also identified ongoing challenges that shape the enactment of inclusive education. Importantly, these challenges were not framed as failures of commitment, but as the result of structural, relational, and systemic conditions within which collaboration must occur. Across contexts, leaders described difficulties arising when families had limited access to information about available support mechanisms or when navigating complex service systems required specialised knowledge. In Italy, participants noted that collaboration was more demanding when families were unfamiliar with the procedures needed to coordinate external services or to understand entitlement frameworks. These challenges were compounded by the emotional labour associated with supporting families as they made sense of their children's needs within highly bureaucratised systems.

In Switzerland and Germany, leaders highlighted the influence of broader policy and funding arrangements on collaborative practice. Resource constraints, including reliance on parental contributions for extended programmes or the need to secure parental agreement through formal governance structures, underscored the extent to which inclusive education remains contingent on system-level decisions. These findings reinforce research demonstrating that inclusion cannot be fully realised through school-level leadership alone, but requires sustained policy commitment and equitable funding models (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Cologon, 2019).

Australian leaders similarly emphasised time pressures and the emotional demands of sustained collaboration, particularly when working with families whose previous experiences with schooling had been marked by exclusion or conflict. In such cases, leadership for inclusion involved significant relational labour aimed at rebuilding trust while simultaneously managing institutional constraints. These experiences echo broader findings in the inclusive education literature that point to the uneven translation of inclusive policy into practice across social, cultural, and economic contexts (Cologon, 2019).

These challenges point to several directions for future research and practice. First, there is a need for leadership and teacher preparation programmes that explicitly address collaboration with families as a core professional capability, rather than an ancillary responsibility (Hornby, 2011). Second, schools and systems would benefit from more accessible and culturally responsive communication strategies that support families with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of familiarity with education systems. Finally, sustained advocacy for policy reform and funding models that reduce reliance on parental resources is essential to ensuring that inclusive education does not reproduce existing inequities. At the same time, the examples identified across contexts—such as sustained continuity of contact in Italy and institutionalised engagement strategies in Switzerland—demonstrate that robust, equitable partnerships are achievable. These practices offer valuable insights into how collaboration can be embedded as a routine feature of inclusive schooling rather than an ad hoc response to individual need.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study drew on a purposive sample of secondary school leaders from schools recognised for their commitment to inclusive education. While this approach enabled in-depth exploration of leadership practices in information-rich contexts, the findings are not intended to be representative of all secondary schools within the participating countries. Instead, the study offers analytic insights into how collaboration with parents is enacted under favourable inclusive conditions.

Second, the study foregrounded the perspectives of school leaders and did not include direct accounts from parents, students, or classroom teachers. As such, the findings reflect leadership interpretations of collaborative processes rather than the lived experiences of all stakeholders involved in inclusive education. While this focus aligns with the study's emphasis on leadership practice, future research would benefit from incorporating parental and student perspectives, as well as observational data, to further illuminate the relational dynamics underpinning collaboration.

Third, the international scope of the study necessarily introduced variation in policy frameworks, governance structures, and cultural norms across contexts. Although this diversity was a strength in enabling cross-national comparison, it also limited the depth with which any single national system could be examined. In particular, the German case involved a single participant and should be interpreted as a contextualised exemplar rather than a comprehensive representation of leadership practice within that system.

Finally, data were generated through interview-based methods, which rely on participants' self-reported practices and reflections. While strategies such as member checking were employed to enhance credibility, the study did not include direct observation of leadership practices or collaborative interactions. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal or ethnographic approaches that capture collaboration as it unfolds over time.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the leadership practices that enable parent—school collaboration for inclusive education across diverse contexts. By foregrounding leadership-mediated processes rather than normative claims, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion as relational, negotiated, and contextually situated practice.

Conclusion

This study contributes cross-national insight into how secondary school leaders enact and sustain collaboration with parents in support of inclusive education. Across diverse policy environments and cultural contexts, the findings underscore the central role of leadership practices in enabling consistent communication, negotiating shared purpose, and institutionalising structures that support collaborative relationships with families. While national differences shaped the form collaboration took, a consistent pattern emerged: inclusive education was most effectively supported when collaboration was relational, reciprocal, and embedded within everyday school practice. These findings align with contemporary scholarship emphasising family—school—community partnerships as foundational to inclusive learning environments (Eden et al., 2024; Grissom

et al., 2021). At the same time, the study highlights the limits of school-level action in the absence of systemic support. Ensuring that inclusive education fulfils its promise of equity for all learners requires attention not only to leadership practice, but also to policy coherence, resource allocation, and the inclusion of diverse family voices in educational decision making (Cologon, 2019; Tampubolon et al., 2023). Ultimately, inclusive education is sustained not simply through goodwill or policy aspiration, but through leadership that recognises collaboration with families as essential, complex, and deeply relational work. Embedding such collaboration as a core principle of education systems remains a critical task for research, policy, and practice worldwide.

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APPENDIX A

Inclusive School Leaders - Interview Prompts

Key Questions:

- Would you consider that your school is inclusive – please elaborate? What do you think has positioned your school as a school of inclusion excellence? Tell us about some of the elements that are working at your school.
- Given that principals hold overall responsibility for leadership, what do you consider your role in making your school inclusive?
- Inclusivity is often a team/collaborative effort - how do you encourage the contribution of your staff, educators and support personnel in your inclusive efforts? How do you support collaboration?
- How do you foster positive and trusting relationships and involve students, parents, and community members in your efforts to create a more inclusive school environment?
- How do you support teachers in developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to promote inclusion in their classrooms?
- How do you set high expectations for all learners in your school, and how do you support teachers in meeting these expectations for students with diverse needs and abilities, especially those vulnerable to exclusion?
- Do you face any resistance from staff/students/parents or the community in implementing inclusive practices? How do you address the resistance?
- Can you give examples of specific policies, practices, or programs you have implemented to promote inclusion and equity in your school?
- Are there any aspects of your organisational structure (e.g., leaders have high autonomy VS a more centralised system) that influence your ability to lead an inclusive school? Please elaborate.

Follow Up Questions:

- What advice would you provide to other school leaders as they journey toward authentic inclusion?
- How do you balance a focus on well-being with a commitment to high achievement for all students?
- What steps have you taken to ensure that all students, especially students with diverse backgrounds and those vulnerable to exclusion, feel welcome and valued at your school?
- Do you measure effectiveness of your inclusive education initiatives? If yes, how? What do you do with any data arising from this measurement?
- How do you evaluate classroom practices to ensure high-quality education and well-being for all students, and how do you use data to inform these efforts?
- Do you collaborate with other schools or community organizations to support inclusive education in your school and the broader community – please provide some examples.
- We know that school leaders should be empowering all staff to be inclusive. Is there anything you would like to add to our discussion?