INVESTIGATING STRENGTH-BASED PRACTICES WITHIN A DUAL-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF INCLUSIONARY STUDENT LEARNING

by

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Abstract

The central area of inquiry for this research was the exploration of educators' perspectives and experiences related to specific strength-based concepts and practices essential for supporting a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education. Using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) research design and methods, a purposeful sample of leaders and key influencers involved in the application of inclusive educational practices were engaged in individual interviews and subsequent focus group discussions via Zoom. Data collection activities encompassed a three-phase AI process: Describe, Dream and Design. Inductive thematic analyses revealed a range of themes including the need for a greater integration of strengths into current educational applications, the envisioning of new learning experiences for students encompassing shifts in educational roles, more flexible learning formats, and the emergence of a potential model for elaboration of strength-based methods into inclusionary educational settings. In the discussion (Destiny phase), potential frameworks for promoting readiness for integrating strength-based methods is discussed and a preliminary description of the *Strength and Support Response Model* (SSRM) is presented. This research effort illuminates specific directions for promoting, building, and embedding strengths within a dual-dimensional view of inclusionary education; however, such directions will ultimately require further introspection, research, and elaboration.

Keywords: strength-based practices, inclusionary education, dual-dimensional approach, self-determination theory, appreciative inquiry

Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated, first and foremost, to my Dad who has been dearly missed throughout this entire journey. His continuous love and support throughout my life made this shared dream of ours a possibility and, ultimately, a reality. The only man at the Teddy Bear Picnic, he lovingly edited each comma and would sit for hours letting me talk through my thought processes.

To Bill, thank you for agreeing to supervise me in the first place. Your endless support and encouragement buoyed me until the very end. I could never have remained as dedicated and focused without your constant guidance. Words cannot explain how much I have learned from you, or the impact you have had on the trajectory of my life.

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Chapter One: Investigating and Conceptualizing the Existence for a Dual-Dimensional Approach to Inclusionary Education

Inclusionary educational models have traditionally operated from a support-oriented approach. A key element of inclusive education has been the intent of removing barriers to learning for students. Within inclusionary models of education over the past several decades, emphasis has been placed on the use of targeted strategies and interventions to support the academic, social emotional, and behavioural development of learners, focusing largely on those with identified learning needs. In focusing on identified learner needs in an attempt to "close the gap" in relation to learning, targeted interventions and support strategies are provided to students experiencing challenges or displaying deficits in areas of learning or personal development. This research investigation illuminates the realities of inclusionary education within the context of New Brunswick public schools while also highlighting the need to move towards a more strength-based approach to enhance the educational experience for all learners, including many examples of practices that are already in play in classrooms and schools throughout the province. This study drew on the experiences, perspectives, and observations of various key stakeholders within the field of education in New Brunswick whose years of dedication to the implementation and evolution of inclusionary education have provided them with knowledge on the impacts that strength-based practices can have on the lives of learners and educators alike.

This dissertation begins with a chapter in which current literature is review. This review of literature includes an in-depth investigation into the history and evolution of inclusionary educational models around the world, highlighting the use of several support

structures which have become embedded within their individual school cultures. As this research model intimates a dual-pathway approach to viewing inclusionary education, the review addresses theories, research designs and methods consistent that align with the values of a strength-based paradigm

The central research question:

"What specific strength-based concepts and practices are essential for supporting a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education that encompasses dimensions related to both support-oriented methods and the promotion of flourishing for all students?"

served as a guide through which individual interview and subsequent focus group questions were developed.

The dissertation's second chapter discusses the research design, methodology as well as its theoretical underpinnings. An Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Action Research Design (Stowell, 2012; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) was used to engage educators as research participants and collaborators in investigating the challenges, successes, and lessons learned associated with the implementation of strength-based practices within inclusionary educational settings. AI methods provided many opportunities for elaborating on and co-creating new perspectives/practices for enhancing strength-based approaches within inclusionary educational settings. Participatory methods that traditionally highlight problem-specific or support-oriented models of inclusionary education were reframed through a positive psychology lens through the use of a 4 phase Appreciative Inquiry approach to further:

- *Discovery:* Explore and amplify existing strengths and promising practices

- *Dream:* Identify potential innovative and transformative approaches
- *Design:* Develop necessary structures and processes to realize a dual dimensional model of inclusionary education (integrative support-oriented and strength-focused model).
- *Destiny:* Exploring future actions that could be taken to sustain the strategies envisioned during the Design phase.

This chapter also includes a detailed discussion of the research methods and process for data collection which took place over the course of a twelve-month period. The Discovery Phase of the research involved individual participant interviews with eight educators holding various roles at various levels within the field of inclusionary education in New Brunswick. The following two research phases (Dream and Destiny) consisted of separate participant focus groups. The Dream Phase focus group entailed imagining potential innovations to inclusionary education through the implementation of strength-based concepts and practices. The Design Phase focus group worked to develop necessary structures to allow the application of these practices within school and classroom settings. The final phase of the Appreciative Inquiry research design, the Destiny Phase, further expanded on the findings of the previous phase and is elaborated upon throughout the discussion section of the dissertation. An inductive approach to content analysis was used to process the collected data, unearthing common themes. Authenticity and questions of validity are also reviewed in this chapter.

The third chapter includes the results of each of the first three phases of the research. The first phase of research explored the unfolding of inclusionary education through which two distinct narratives were identified in relation to experiences and

observations of the adoption, implementation, and emergence of practices within New Brunswick's educational context. From this, a conflicting dissonance was uncovered between educators' professional beliefs and current embedded inclusionary practices. Through the continued discussion and exploration from the following focus groups, four main themes emerged in relation to the pursuit of a strength-based paradigm, developing a collective strength-based mindset, identified emergent strength-based practices, the role of visionaries, and needing a process for change. Due to the active participatory nature of the Appreciative Inquiry research design, most sections of the chapter incorporate quotes from participants.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation contains further discussion of themes and that emerged from the analysis of the data. These themes explore the findings implication to current inclusionary education practice and ultimately present the *Strength and Support Response Model for Journeying with Students.* Several of these discussion points include direct quotations coming from the various data collection activities throughout the entirety of this research investigation. This chapter concludes with the acknowledgements of limitations of the research as well as identifies potential for future research in this area.

Findings from this research contribute valuable insights into the conceptualization of dual-dimensional approaches for inclusionary education.

Review of Literature: Strength-based Perspectives and Practices within the Inclusive Classroom

Introduction

Inclusionary educational models affirm that every student can learn, and opportunities for learning should be provided equitably for students supporting their potential to flourish personally, socially, and academically within educational settings. A key element of inclusive educational systems has been the intent of removing barriers to learning for students, and ensuring that educational personnel have access to strategies, resources, and approaches that enable them to operationalize educational structures that build and extend students' potential to become self-directed learners within the classroom, and beyond (Haug, 2016; Mitchell, 2015; Ryndak, Jackson & Billingsley, 2000). In Canada, the formal movement of inclusion began in the mid-80s with the closure of segregated schools and institutions. Initial efforts to support the paradigm of inclusion resulted in the addition of targeted supports and accommodations, and the carrying out of curriculum modifications within traditional classrooms to support learning for a wide range of student needs. Resource teacher roles and student services teams emerged as established structures within most school environments, focusing on determining areas of challenge to learning and providing intervention strategies for remediating or problem solving such areas of concern (Goodall, 2018; Porter & Aucoin, 2012). Recent perspectives on inclusionary approaches have emphasized the need to move beyond a problem-focused and support-oriented model of student learning to incorporate a more strength-focused and empowering view of students' learning, drawing on their strengths, interests, preferences, and motivations (Abawi, 2015; Buli-Holmberg

& Jeyaprathaban, 2016; Morrison & Peterson, 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Williamson & Gilham, 2017).

The Development of the Idea of Inclusion

Inclusion within the global education system has sparked great discussion and debate in recent years, yet the idea of inclusion is not a novel one. Researchers and philosophers alike have been examining the various elements involved in creating and sustaining an inclusive education system for decades. Research began in the 1940s and has continued throughout the decades that followed with well-known academics such as social constructivist theorists Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (1998), as well as Piaget (1952) and Bandura (1996) within their respective theories of cognitive development and social learning. It was not until UNESCO held an international conference where the Salamanca Declaration was signed by over 90 countries in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) that the world took notice, and education systems around the world began the vast undertaking of applying their individual versions and interpretations of inclusion within the classroom and school environment.

Within Canada, particularly in the province of New Brunswick, the Porter Report published in 2012 (Porter & Aucoin, 2012), prompted a shift in the way the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, school districts, administrators and educators viewed and strove to implement inclusive practices within their schools and classrooms. The review of the current state of inclusion within the province at the time, and the numerous recommendations that were strongly encouraged to be implemented within a short period of time, drew the attention of all stakeholders within the education system. The report received much attention from the media and

plans were put into place to implement the Action Plan for Inclusion in New Brunswick (Province of New Brunswick, 2013).

Common Definitions

The difficulty with the application of an authentically inclusive education system is that there are varying definitions used throughout the literature to justify current practices and validate beliefs on the subject of inclusion in different countries around the world. Throughout the review of recent literature, variations in terms of defining *inclusion* could easily explain the inconsistencies being examined and practiced globally, encompassing individual classrooms within the same schools. Paju et al. (2018) explained these inconsistencies in defining inclusive education to be a result of the fact that these definitions – and by extension, practices – are developed from governmental policy and culturally-driven interpretations. In exploring the various existing definitions offered throughout current literature, it is also important to note what education and inclusion are not. Walker and Musti-Rao (2016) stated that inclusive education is not advocating for resources, infrastructure, technology, or equipment. It is also not a matter of simply adjusting the curriculum to make learning easier or providing updated professional development to current and pre-service educators. These are quite often used as excuses to explain why inclusive education is not possible, practical, or presently being done effectively. Educators, administrators, and the general public need to move away from these preconceptions to develop a globally unified definition of inclusion as well as a framework within which to work, allowing stakeholders to make inclusive education not only possible, but the new mainstream approach to education around the world.

The main themes that come from attempts to define inclusion primarily reflect a deficit-based assumption that it is the students with physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities who need to be included within the mainstream classroom. This limited view of inclusion alludes to it as being merely a shared physical space among students with various needs (Kershner, 2016). In this case, students are moved out of their specialized schools and into locally zoned mainstream schools and placed in classrooms with peers of the same age (Schwab, 2015) with little consideration to the individual needs of the learner or appropriate teaching approaches that would yield the best results. Within this model, students are physically included but often still segregated from their peers through various pull-out interventions and specialized classes. Göransson & Nilholm (2014) also stated that while placement is a crucial element of inclusion, it is only one of many methods towards inclusive education rather than the successful holistic practice of inclusion itself. Perspectives in other parts of the world continue to be of this same mindset. Pearson and Tan (2015) studied the views of educators in Brunei, finding that inclusive education is about schools ensuring that all students, regardless of social, physical, and economical differences participate in learning experiences that include a non-differentiated sense of belonging, nurturing and education. While the content of this particular definition is a step in the right direction, differentiation in instruction is often necessary for many students to succeed.

There are other definitions in which the numerous benefits of inclusion are recognized when used to teach all students within the classroom in the way in which they learn best (Kershner, 2016). Göransson & Nilhom (2014) stated it more simply by defining inclusion as meeting the needs of all students. Research shows the various

qualities - empathy, acceptance, and tolerance – that many students acquire through the successful practice and implementation of a truly inclusive classroom environment. In line with value-based ideology, Williamson & Gilham (2017) defined inclusion as a concept and value involving the belonging of all students. Their research involved exploring the new inclusion policies being initiated by the province of Alberta in Canada in recent years. Their mandate was to embrace learner differences, create equal opportunities for all learners and to ensure that educators took collective responsibility for all learners. In much the same way, Veck (2014) defined inclusion to be when "specialized instructional practices and settings are eliminated in education" (p. 452).

Biamba (2016), too, noted that there was little consensus in terms of a common definition which ultimately affects effective and consistent inclusive practices. His research determined that inclusion should "occur within the framework of the ordinary class, social feelings of solidarity and time together are prioritized and differences between children are accepted and respected" (p. 120). This indicates that all students, not only those with a learning deficit or disability, are to be included and considered during instruction. He also concluded that administrators and educators were often apt to rely on the policies requiring inclusion "to the maximum extent appropriate" (Biamba, 2016) as a way to validate moments when students were not being included in activities or lessons with their like-aged peers. Similarly, research conducted by Hakala and Leivo (2017) found that the definitions being embraced within Finnish schools that have been identified as slower to progress towards a more inclusive model were ones where "inclusive, participatory teaching is an educational experience for the whole generation: no one is excluded due to a disability or any other quality" (p. 288).

Paju et al. (2017) offered a vague definition of inclusion in terms of its broadness in Finland as a response to 167 questionnaires completed by educators. They asserted that "the basic aim of inclusive education is to guarantee the right of every child to attend school and to ensure that the individual characteristics of the child do not limit school attendance" (p. 11).

More progressive are the definitions by various researchers such as Kershner (2016) and Movkebayeva et al. (2016) who have seen the impact that an involved and inclusive community presence can have on students. Throughout the various research reviewed there was mention of community in the sense of a school sharing a common vision and working collaboratively to achieve it. An additional important element entailed having members of the surrounding community coming into the school and acting as mentors and building meaningful and relevant relationships with the students. Movkebayeva et al. (2016) stressed the need to establish an educational environment within the education system and its individual schools where children could be allowed to realize their full potential and feel connected to the community and larger world around them.

Unfortunately, in defining inclusion there seem to be two branches of thought. There are the philosophical, idealist definitions of what inclusion could and should be, and then there are the more limited views of inclusion which focus on what inclusion generally looks like in practice. Though there are many inconsistencies in terms of defining inclusion, it is clear through the various definitions that the key values are present and shared among educators worldwide. Sanagi (2016) stated most adeptly that

inclusion is “a process that allows expansion of the scope of inclusion so as to include diversity in individual education needs” (p. 103).

The idea of inclusion being a process rather than a program is a promising notion that can allow continued growth within the education system globally.

Perspectives

Lost among the confusion of the varying definitions of inclusion, there are also varying perspectives on the subject of inclusion as well. These perspectives have been found to be shared among educators, administrators, parents, students, and society as a whole. There are those who see inclusion as a philosophy. The root ideas of bringing inclusion into the education system, including, and maximizing the quality of education for all students, stem from the various philosophies surrounding development and learning such as those found in the works of theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1952). There are, however, other elements necessary to provide a truly inclusive system. It is here that Biamba (2016) brings the perspective of inclusion as a practice. There are many efficient practices that can lend themselves to an inclusive classroom, or better still, a school community. Kozleski et al. (2015) echoed the opinion that inclusion is a never-ending journey. They viewed inclusion as a principle of practice and that effective practices were to be at the heart of inclusion itself (Kozleski et al., 2015).

Another common perspective is that inclusion is a process rather than a practice. Inclusion is not one-size-fits-all (Lilley, 2015). For this reason, there is not an algorithm in which inclusion can be implemented for every student. Each school, and each student within these schools, has a variety of different needs to be met. For this reason, it is important to view inclusion as a continual process that is never-ending (Sanagi, 2016).

Schools must take steps to implement inclusive processes and continually review and change these processes as the needs of their students' change as well.

Yet another perspective exists in which inclusion must be an evolution and not a revolution (Pavlovié, 2016). Various government mandates have been presented globally since the signing of the Salamanca Declaration in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) making the practices of inclusive education not completely novel. Schools at various stages of the implementation process of inclusive education practices do not need to change in entirety overnight. As mentioned above, inclusion is a process that must evolve with its ever-changing clientele, the students entering the schools. This evolution must also occur within the belief systems and educational philosophies of the educators.

There is also a cultural perspective that needs to be considered when discussing inclusion. There is a persisting opinion that seems to have been transferred from earlier generations that inclusion exists for students who are not *normal* (Paju et al., 2018). This persisting opinion has proved to be difficult to dispel and overcome. Thomazet (2009) wrote that our:

> "modern society tends to medicalize its problems: it is no longer the education system, which is ill, but the children" (p. 559).

According to Statistics Canada (2012), the number of elementary aged students with learning disabilities was 20% higher than students without learning disabilities. Often children with a diagnosed learning disability, while receiving educational supports, are also being medicated. This is particularly true of those with comorbid diagnoses of a learning disability (LD) alongside attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). I

believe this is what Thomazet (2009) was referring to when he suggested that we are medicating our children to succeed in inclusion.

Another cultural aspect to be considered is that there are various cultures around the world who place extremely high value on academic performance and achievement. Research completed by Walker & Musti-Rao (2016) found that cultures such as that of Singapore were not initially accepting of the practice of inclusion within their educational setting. This was less to do with educators' views and more to do with perspectives of parents, families, and the wider community. A review of current inclusive practices in the country of Jordan found that parents with students needing various inclusive supports would often opt to send their child to a school far away from their community or keep them home, not receiving an education at all, for fear of being socially ostracized due to their cultural climate and social perceptions (Amr et al., 2016). There is evidently still a cultural stigma surrounding the idea of exceptional learners as well as the practice of true inclusion. This is something that is evident globally. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) began taking steps towards inclusive education in 2010 to build cultural awareness, teacher training on effective differentiation and practical strategies to be used in an inclusive classroom (Alborno, 2017).

One perspective that has been a focus in the media of late is the belief that the inclusion model does not apply to second language learners. As a French Immersion teacher, I have been witness to the reality that there is limited resource support available for individual student programming and intervention in second language programs. However, studies consistently show that inclusion has a place in all education programs, including that of second language learning. Scholars such as Cobb (2015) argue that

Immersion programs being implemented in Canada in provinces such as Alberta, Ontario and New Brunswick have developed loopholes within their individual education systems in terms of their inclusionary mandates. An argument, or perhaps misconception, about the Immersion program is that certain students, particularly those with cognitive or other types of learning difficulties, cannot be part of an Immersion program. This belief has resulted from the reality of the lack of support as well as the view that students would struggle in succeeding in this second language, and that they would be missing out on essential learning in their first language, where they might have more success. Wise (2011) has spent her career as a consultant and scholar fighting for equity and supports within French Immersion programs in Canada, arguing that there are interventions available within the classroom, if not from the resource team itself. In their book *Access for Success,* Arnett & Bourgoin (2018) provide various practical suggestions for interventions that can be easily applied by the classroom teacher to ensure the success of struggling learners in a second language program.

Rights-based Philosophy

The fact remains that regardless of individual educator, administrator, parent or student perspectives, all individuals have the right to an education and to be included in all areas where they can be. Global documents supported by UNESCO such as the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), have made inclusion, in whatever way school boards and governments around the world decide to interpret and define it, to be mandatory. Regardless of the definition, the purpose of the document was to allow access to all students to inclusive education with peers of their age (Biamba, 2016). An element of the rights-based philosophy approach to inclusive education is that ultimately someone

needs to take responsibility to ensure that inclusion is being implemented properly within schools. Hakala et al. (2017) stated that this responsibility should fall under one of the roles government already has in terms of education.

In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms acknowledges the right of all children to attend their own zoned mainstream schools with other students of their own age. It is Canada's independent provincial and territorial governments that are responsible for the overseeing of education policies and practices. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for the province of New Brunswick has a document dedicated solely to the policy surrounding inclusive education within its system. The document defines the various terms and roles of stakeholders related to inclusion within the province. The policy indicates the requirements and standards for common learning environments, necessary supports, and personalized learning plans for struggling students. Unfortunately, the policy also focuses on the deficits of individual students rather than focusing on strength-based approaches and personalized learning plans for all students. In more recent years Porter & Aucoin (2012) were tasked to research, write, and publish a document assessing New Brunswick's current inclusive practices and provide recommendations suggesting how New Brunswick should strive to implement and sustain superior inclusionary practices within the education system.

In this document there are recommendations for various changes to be put in place within a very specific time frame. There are recommendations made to include and improve the various elements, both physical and educational, of the learning environment as well as the multiple roles and responsibilities of the numerous stakeholders involved within the inclusionary process. While this report is still referenced frequently when

planning and discussing the current state of inclusion and ways to continue moving forward, there are many remaining obstacles making several of the recommendations still unattained to date. Increased behaviour challenges within the public-school systems require members of the Educational Support Services Team (ESST) to be on call at a moment's notice to intervene or remove a student from their classroom in a moment of escalation or crisis. Increased administrative duties being added to the roles and responsibilities of resource educators takes away from their time that could be better used coaching, collaborating, and team-teaching with their colleagues, a valuable practice that would have a more significant impact on student learning.

Features of an Inclusive Classroom

Several common features are repeatedly mentioned throughout the research as being crucial in the promotion, implementation, and sustainability of a truly inclusive classroom. It should be noted that the term *classroom* is used in reference to a common learning environment. For this reason, classroom and learning community will be used interchangeably. For inclusive education to even begin to be present within a school or learning community, there needs to be a common shared vision. Administration, staff, and other stakeholders must all have a personal and professional commitment to inclusion (Lyons et al., 2016) and what that will mean for their school, their students, their teaching staff and their own teaching beliefs and practices. Lyons et al. (2016) stated that educators having a clear vision of inclusion for their school that focuses on all students is a key feature to a successful inclusive environment. This included a shared responsibility for the success and needs of all students (Roberts et al., 2018). For the successful implementation of inclusion, even in the first initial steps, there are many changes that

need to be made to the physical environment as well as individual subject outcome objectives to ensure accessibility and success for all students (Pavlovié, 2016).

Collaboration within the learning environment is essential for inclusion to be successful (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016). Educators within a school need to work together to design lessons, programs and interventions that will meet the needs of all learners. This collaborative team approach is a proactive strategy for inclusion (Lyons et al., 2016). Part of collaboration means common planning time for these plans to be well designed and confidently implemented (Katz & Sokal, 2016). Collaboration can also be accomplished through the practice of team-teaching and coaching (Roberts et al., 2018). With team-teaching there are consistently two educators in the classroom able to divide the class into smaller groups, observe student behaviour, collect data as well as implement programming and interventions. Coaching is a method of modeling different styles of teaching allowing knowledge, experience, and skills to be shared among invested professionals.

Support is another feature of an inclusive classroom that is experienced by both educators and students. Educators need to feel supported by other educators, administrators, and their students' parents. This can be achieved through meaningful parental involvement within the collaborative school community. Ongoing communication is one of the most important features related to support (Lyons et al., 2016). Secondly, students must also feel supported within their learning environment. Through differentiation and flexible teaching styles, students can feel supported and achieve success. In terms of differentiation and teaching styles, this can only be achieved through professionals' ability to adapt frequently to the ever-changing needs of their

students and classroom compositions (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016). These changes in curriculum and/or the way they are presented to students with various learning needs can only be achieved successfully by the creativity (McMaster, 2013) and full engagement (Roberts et al., 2018) of the educators to gather, share and build on existing resources, skills, and energy.

It must be acknowledged that while it is necessary to move away from the deficit-based model, there are many students struggling in a variety of ways. Many of these struggles require support and interventions. For this reason, an important feature of an inclusive educational environment is a tiered system of support available for educators, students, and their families (Paju et al., 2018). This can be in the format of a three-tiered pyramid of interventions or having positive behavioural interventions and supports in place within the school among the qualified support staff. Likewise, there is an important place within the practice of inclusive education for various tools and resources to be used effectively to support student learning (Lyons et al., 2016). These supports include assistive technology (Roberts et al., 2018) such as individual student computers, tablets and computer programs and applications to name a few.

Within the classroom itself, there are other features that indicate a successfully inclusive classroom environment. Choice is a very powerful feature for students with both academic and social-emotional challenges (Walker & Musti-Rao, 2016). Students are able to gain the same knowledge and master the same learning outcomes through the completion of a variety of different activities from those of their mainstream peers, providing students with the choice on how they access and represent their learning. One of the many ways that options can be present is through play. When considering the

inclusion of students with special education needs of a younger age in particular, play allows these students to be included both through proximity as well as interaction (Baines et al., 2015). Another way to achieve this element of choice of instruction is through Project-Based Learning (PBL). When students are engaged in this process, they are able to choose their subject matter in many cases and create a final product that will demonstrate their learning and ability to share their newly gained knowledge with their peers.

Successful Inclusion

Despite the many wonderful things that are happening internationally in relation to inclusion within the education system, there is no denying that there are various challenges which prevent, or at the very least inhibit, the complete and successful implementation of inclusion. While many believe that inclusion does not work, perhaps it is possible that we are simply not doing it right (Mooney & Lashewicz, 2015).

Freitag and Dunsmuir (2015) noted that an indicator of success in inclusion is the acceptance felt by students from their teacher as well as their peers. They also stated, as suggested above, that a successful inclusive education model has not only academic objectives but social objectives as well. Echoing the many features and practices of inclusion discussed above, inclusion provides not only access to equal education opportunities but also opportunities to experience meaningful interactions with their peers (Freitag & Dunsmuir, 2015).

Synthesizing the findings in the recent literature allows for some concrete statements to be made in regard to inclusion as a practice. It is evident that positive teacher perception is crucial for the success and sustainability of inclusion within the

school system. If this positive perception is not shared among a staff, training, guidance, collaboration, and support are necessary to facilitate a shift in pedagogical understanding and effective inclusionary practices. While McMaster (2013) stated that one educator cannot bring about an inclusive school community in isolation, Biamba (2016) found that while collaboration within the school community is crucial, it is possible for one teacher to have a critical influence in the promotion and development of an inclusive school environment. Lyons et al. (2016) viewed the team approach as the ideal method for sustaining inclusion. A good motto for educators around the world would be: "*We can do it together"* (McMaster, 2013; Biamba, 2016; Lyons et al., 2016).

As mentioned before, educators need to be supported in several different ways. Continuous budget cuts made at the departmental level do not give educators the feeling of being supported by limiting training, teacher mentors and educational assistants (Lyons et al., 2016). These have all been repeatedly found to be important factors in maintaining an inclusive system in education.

Much of the research concluded that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support and demonstrate the effectiveness of inclusionary practices for the benefit of all students. Because inclusion lacks a common definition, even with the many common features identified in various countries and their respective scholars, it would be difficult to design a study that would provide this empirical evidence. There are so many varying practices and teaching styles that measuring success quantitatively would be difficult.

Much of the implementation of inclusion to date has been concentrated on the use of a support-services model, delivering necessary resources and interventions to students based on need. There is immense value in having an educational system cognizant of the

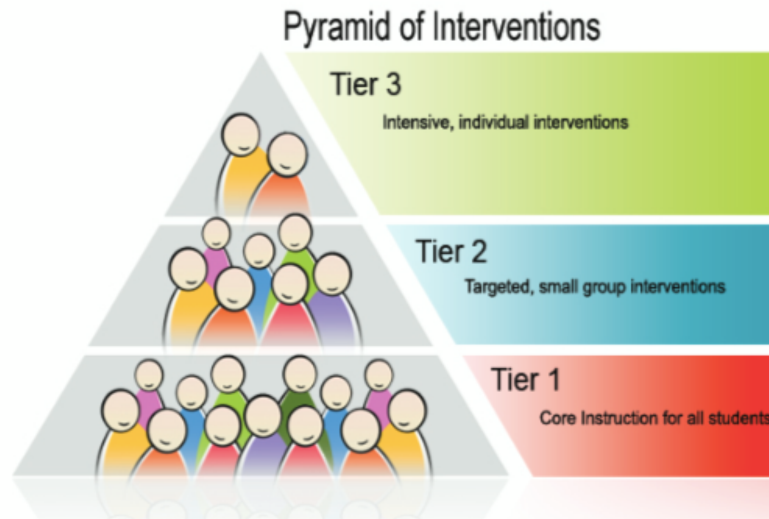
need to have a working model in place, not only to identify student needs but also to deliver interventions of the right intensity to students at the appropriate time. Various existing models provide these responses to intervention supports and services.

Response to Intervention

There are various models of a tiered system approach providing response to intervention that enable all students to receive the education, resources and support necessary for them to succeed. These models work under the assumption that students receiving targeted interventions of appropriate intensity at the appropriate time will progress, whether academically, personally, or socially, within their perspective educational settings. These response to intervention (RtI) models came to be after the adoption of inclusive education policies around the world. Though initially designed with the focus on academic learning, RtI offers a comprehensive model for early intervention of both behavioural and academic delays being exhibited by students within the inclusive education system (Fox et al., 2010). RtI is a continuum-based process that focuses on access to high quality, evidence-based instruction and data-driven decision making in order to facilitate early intervention on behalf of the students requiring support (Howery et al., 2013). The practices and interventions rely heavily on evidence-based research and practices in order to best serve students in need or at risk. Through consistent monitoring, evaluation and data collection, student progress is tracked by an in-house student support services team in order to plan and guide further interventions. Most commonly, these tiered interventions are presented in the form of a pyramid of intervention such as the one featured below.

Figure 1

Pyramid of Interventions



Province of New Brunswick, 2015

This three-tiered system identifies the various degrees of intervention that are available to students based on the strategies having already been attempted as well as the degree of need that is being reported or exhibited by the learner and their educational team. The majority of student needs exist within the bottom tier of the pyramid of interventions. At this level, there are universal accommodations available to all students in an effort to support learning taking into account the varying needs of students. Differentiated instruction; adjusting methods of instruction, accepting different individual learning patterns (Fox et al., 2010) as well as social-emotional centered learning are just some of the effective teaching strategies available in the first tier of the pyramid model. Howery et al. (2013) noted the metaphor surrounding the pyramid of interventions to be that “the higher levels of support are ineffective without a solid base”. For this reason, many schools and districts put a great deal of time, money, and support into properly funding and implementing universal interventions at the classroom level to support the

learning and development of all students. This proactive measure is taken so that fewer students will require the more extensive tertiary supports of the upper tiers. As students begin to demonstrate certain risk factors such as behavioural issues or falling below curricular expectations they are met with more targeted interventions. While typically only 15% of students require these second-tier interventions, they are aided through additional instruction beyond the mandated curriculum as well as instruction in smaller groups and progress monitoring. The third tier contains much more elaborate and extensive interventions and are carried out as a remedial approach to improving behaviour and academic performance (Fox et al., 2010). These interventions differ from the second tier as the practices are more individualized and intense both in instruction frequency and evaluation methods.

An additional element of RtI focusing more on preventative measures by modeling expected behaviour is the Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. PBIS has become a prevalent addition to the larger RtI model being implemented throughout North America and other parts of the world. With government-initiated policies such as *No Child Left Behind,* as well as the various interpretations of inclusive education, schools have been tasked with the challenge of dealing with behavioural issues and disciplinary measures beyond the traditional detention and suspension methods (Knowles, 2014). Much like the pyramid of interventions, PBIS programs are proactive, research-validated, and data-driven in design with the focus of modifying problematic behaviours commonly exhibited within the school setting. Frequently, these programs are also based on the familiar principle of tiered interventions. The first tier addresses whole school expectations and policies surrounding

behaviour. These policies can include attendance, tardiness, and overall expected interventions (Chitiyo & May, 2018). Unlike the pyramid of interventions, however, the tier two and three interventions not only provide consequences for unexpected and inappropriate behaviour but also attempt to determine the root cause of these behaviours. Like any program or framework being implemented within the education system, to have sustainable success it must be implemented as a whole-school approach. This can only be achieved with whole-staff buy-in, proper and thorough training as well as consistent application of the programs and their procedures. In their research Knowles (2014) confirmed that the proper enactment of the PBIS program positively altered school climate and individual student academic performance.

The common forms of RtI as mentioned above do show a proactive desire to provide support and services to students at risk of falling through the cracks within the education system. These tiered models, however, do not promote interventions from a strength-based perspective and often function from a deficit or problem-oriented focus. As noted by McCashen (2005): "The problem is the problem; the person is not the problem" (p. 9). Deficit-focused programs and interventions cause further damage by propagating reduced self-confidence, lowered motivation as well as reduced relatedness among affected students (Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013). More recently with individual strengths being at the forefront of academic research and discourse other models are being developed to address these limitations. Laija-Rodriguez et al. (2013) introduced such a model in their detailed discussion of the Leveraging Strengths Assessment and Intervention Model (LeStAIM). This theoretical framework emphasizes student strengths to leverage weaknesses in cognitive, academic, and social-emotional functioning.

LeStAIM operates with the intention of understanding students' strengths, assets and needs in these various areas of development while also helping parents and students to also understand as well through the development and implementation of tiered interventions.

LeStAIM differs from traditional RtI models particularly in terms of its assessment methods. Laija-Rodriguez et al. (2013) describe *dynamic assessment* as being qualitative data provided by the student throughout the assessment periods as a way to understand processing, learning and ZPD (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathanban, 2016) as a means to better assist the student through the planning of appropriate interventions in their learning. Beyond traditional standardized testing methods, attention must be given to subtle behaviours and mannerisms (Laija-Rodriguez et al. 2013).

Table 1

Leveraging Strengths

Tradition Assessment	LeStAIM
- Uses review of records, interviews, observations	- Uses review of records, interviews, observations
- Uses informal, curriculum-based, and standardized testing	- Uses informal, curriculum-based, and standardized testing
- Addresses strengths, but focuses on weaknesses	- Addresses weaknesses, but **focuses on strengths**
- Focuses on scores to classify performance compared to the norm	- **Interprets scores and uses dynamic assessment** to understand individual's learning.
- Lacks a theoretical framework to derive at a hypotheses about the problem	- Uses learning theories, **neurodevelopmental constructs, positive psychology and resiliency, ecological theory** to derive at a hypothesis
- Is deficit-based (will only address strengths as part of the IEP)	- **Focuses on strengths, assets, and needs to leverage students' strengths to address weaknesses**
- Focuses on eligibility	- Eligibility is addressed, but **focus is on empowering the student and parents** to optimize outcomes
- Standard recommendations	- **Recommendations and interventions uses the leveraging of individual and multi-systemic strengths based on hypothesis**

Laija-Rodriguez, W. et al., 2013

Beyond improvement to academic performance, successful use of the LeStAIM model's interventions have promoted strengthened development of student wellness and competencies.

Support-oriented Dimension

Inclusionary educational models affirm that every student can learn, and opportunities for learning should be provided equitably for students supporting their potential to flourish personally, socially, and academically within educational settings. A key element of inclusive educational systems has been the intent of removing barriers to learning for students, and ensuring that educational personnel have access to strategies, resources, and approaches that enable them to operationalize educational structures that build and extend students' potential to become self-directed learners within the classroom and beyond (Haug, 2016; Mitchell, 2015; Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 2000). The formal movement of inclusion began in the mid-80s with the closure of segregated schools and institutions. Initial efforts to support the paradigm of inclusion resulted in the addition of targeted supports, accommodations and the carrying out of curriculum modifications within traditional classrooms to support learning for a wide range of student needs. Resource teacher roles, and student services teams emerged as established structures within most school environments, focusing on determining areas of challenge to learning and providing intervention strategies for remediating or problem solving such areas of concern (Porter & Aucoin, 2012; Goodall 2018). These support services teams are a crucial element of the inclusionary model within our public schools, consisting of professional stakeholders within the school's learning community devoted to meeting the identified needs of students. A school-based Education Support Services Team is a group led by school administration that assists classroom teachers in the development and implementation of instructional and/or management strategies as well as the coordination of support resources for students. These student services teams consist of professionals within the field of education, each possessing strengths, skills, and expertise in various

areas of support, intervention, and service delivery. Generally consisting of methods and resource teachers, guidance counselors, educational assistants, behaviour mentors as well as school psychologists, the primary role of each team members is to provide coaching, mentoring, training and support to the classroom teacher in accommodations, instructional strategies and other related classroom practices to ensure access to inclusive services for all students as well as to provide the necessary personalized services as may be required to meet the needs of individual students (Province of New Brunswick, 2015).

New Brunswick revolutionized its approach to providing support services to youth across the province through the design and implementation of an integrated service delivery framework (ISD) (Province of New Brunswick, 2015). The ISD framework serves to connect at-risk children, youth and their families with programs and services available to them within their community through the collaboration of multiple provincial departments, such as the Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development, Social Development, Public Health and Safety and Health, as well as the local School Districts and Regional Health Authorities. These departments began partnering together to increase collaboration and coordination of programs and services being provided to youth and their families. Prior to the development of the ISD framework, individual departments worked within silos of expertise, often serving the same children individually while repeating assessment and referral processes. ISD provides a more comprehensive vision from which to coordinate, assess and build service delivery capacity. The goal of ISD is to address service gaps in early assessment and intervention services for children, youth, and their families, as well as to enhance the global system's capacity to respond in a timely, effective, and integrated manner through the development

of single profiles of children and/or youth, including their complex strengths and needs (Province of New Brunswick, 2015; Morrison & Peterson, 2013).

To date, inclusionary practice and pedagogy in New Brunswick has existed within a support-oriented, and arguably deficit-based dimension. Support service and delivery teams are necessary in ensuring access and support for all students within an inclusive education system. More recently, though, the need for the identification and mobilization of student strengths when planning differentiated instruction within an inclusionary classroom setting has been noted. Theoretical perspectives, stemming from positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) have drawn on these areas of individual strengths as a means for promoting wellbeing and all-around flourishing. From these perspectives, various well-known frameworks have been developed and implemented within inclusionary classroom settings internationally.

Inclusion in Education: Deficit and Strength-based Orientations

The various types of inclusive education policies and implementations being researched and observed around the world focus primarily on a deficit-based model. This model focuses on students with varying degrees of academic, physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social-emotional difficulties. Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban (2016) stated that the purpose of education was to contribute to cultural and moral growth, mastering social skills and academic learning. These values, knowledge and skill bases allow individuals to fully realize and utilize their talents and abilities (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016). Official provincial documents such as the New Brunswick Education Act (1997) site personalized learning plans from the aforementioned deficit-based perspective. Article 12(1) of the New Brunswick Education Act states:

A personalized learning plan shall be developed for a pupil if the superintendent concerned, after consulting with qualified persons, determines that the physical, sensorial, cognitive, social-emotional, or other needs of the pupil requires that a personalized learning plan be developed.

Similarly, Policy 322 Article 6.2.1 of the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Education (2013) states:

Inclusive public education:

- Recognizes that every student can learn.
- Is universal – the provincial curriculum is provided equitably to all students, and this is done in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate peers in their neighbourhood school.
- Is individualized – the educational program achieves success by focusing on the student's strengths and needs and is based on the individual's best interest.
- Is requiring school personnel to be flexible and responsive to change.
- Is respectful of student and staff diversity in regard to their race, colour, religion, national origin, ancestry, place of origin, age, disability, marital status, real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity, sex, social condition or political belief or activity.
- Is delivered in an accessible physical environment where all students and school personnel feel welcome, safe, and valued.

A key element of sustaining an inclusive education system consists of the removal of barriers to learning as well as ensuring access to learning opportunities for relevant school personnel. The Department of Education and Early Childhood

> Development (EECD) and districts must establish and maintain a professional learning program to ensure that educational staff have the knowledge and skills needed to provide effective instruction to a diverse student population.
>
> Inclusive education practices are not only necessary for all students to develop and prosper, but also critical to building a society that is inclusive of all people and their basic legal, civil, and human rights (p.5).

While this inclusive policy outlines many of the beliefs necessary to implement a fully inclusive educational experience, the remainder of the policy document continues by delineating the various resource and support systems in place within New Brunswick's educational system.

More current research is being published further delving into the area of strength-based approaches. While the deficit-based models that are currently in use clearly identify struggling students in the name of inclusion, students instead feel unaccepted and inferior to their like-aged peers. Strength-based approaches, on the other hand, focus on educators developing relationships with their students, learning of their individual strengths and personal interests. The Salamanca Declaration of 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) specified that education policy programs were to be individualized. While it was stated that emphasis should be communal rather than focused on individuals' requirements, it was also urged that societies begin focusing on individuals' strengths (Hakala & Leivo, 2017). Through planned learning around students' strengths, students feel empowered and have been found to make more progress both socially and academically. Elder and Rood (2018) further explored strength-based approaches in light of writing personalized learning plans. Their research also showed that the vast majority of classroom and

resource teachers were prone to highlight a student's deficits when designing and writing their individualized education plans (IEPs). Their writing provided examples of how the wording of such a plan can paint the learner in a specific light. Vocabulary highlighting abilities continues to allow educators to address problem areas in education, though from a more strength-centered approach. From the strength-based perspective, Elder and Rood (2018) ascertain that educational teams acknowledging the competency of the struggling student from the outset of the planning process will increase the likelihood of their subsequent progress, success, and achievements.

Evolution of a Strength-based Theoretical Perspective

Positive Psychology

The origin of psychology has traditionally been based on identifying dysfunction and determining what is *wrong* with the individual. Positive Psychology has breathed new life into the discipline with concepts and ideas of hope, optimism, happiness, and well-being (Stebleton et al., 2012). Positive Psychology has been termed the study of what makes the human life worth living. This good life is characterized by a multitude of qualities and values that contribute to a whole and fulfilling life. The idea for this new area of study began when the term *Positive Psychology* was first mentioned by Maslow in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954). Maslow was troubled by psychology's focus on disorder and dysfunction. He believed that it did not represent a true understanding of human potential which he explored at length through his theory of self-actualization (Zhao, 2018).

In the late 1990s, Positive Psychology became a recognized domain of psychology, made popular by Seligman. Since that time, it has gained accreditation in the

academic world. In the early stages of his career Seligman sought to determine what makes happy people happy, what many called his pursuit of happiness. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) define Positive Psychology as the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive Psychology is a systematic theory grounded in the traditional scientific method for verification and validation of findings. Seligman (2002) determined through Positive Psychology that happiness consisted of three dimensions: The Pleasant Life, The Good Life, and the Meaningful Life. The Pleasant life is realized through one's ability to appreciate the simple pleasures of life such as relationships and environmental beauty. The Good Life is achieved through the identification and acknowledgement of one's personal strengths. These strengths should then be utilized to enhance life. Finally, the Meaningful Life provides a sense of deep fulfillment through the utilization of one's strengths for a purpose that is *bigger than them*. Often this is achieved through involvement in religion, spirituality, and community services (Seligman, 2002).

More recently Seligman amended his theory of *Authentic Happiness* (2002) to *Flourishing* which looks at life through the lens of Positive Psychology while also considering mental health and well-being. Still focused on the identification, acknowledgement and mobilization of individual strengths, Seligman (2011) deemed that the new focal topic of Positive Psychology would be the construct of well-being rather than the whole of life satisfaction. While he firmly believes that well-being can be built upon and does not exist in isolation, he sought in his research to identify the contributing

elements of well-being such as: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and achievement. More recently, the focus on investigating elements of holistic health and well-being has resulted in the addition of a sixth element to the PERMA model, Health (both physical and psychological). In this model, Health refers to the establishment of positive health behaviours and habits as they relate to eating, sleeping, and exercising (Norrish et al., 2013).

Csikszentmihalyi researched in the field of Positive Psychology in its earlier years as a branch of psychology. His contribution to the field was greatly due to the use of the term *flow* to describe optimal experiences of students (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). More recently, Csikszentmihalyi used various elements of well-being: self-esteem, control, and emotions through the lens of Positive Psychology to explore student interest and boredom at school during their adolescent years (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Frederickson, a professor of psychology, has worked and collaborated with Seligman on a number of occasions on the subject of positive emotion. For the past two decades she has conducted several research studies in an attempt to answer important life questions such as: *"What is positivity?" "Can positivity transform lives?"* Her positive emotion theory, broaden-and-build, sees positive emotions as broadening thought-action repertoires whose functions serve to build enduring personal resources (Frederickson, 2001). More recently, Frederickson's book *Positivity* (2013) and the unveiling of the *Positivity Ratio* tool has gained recognition in its ability to provide individuals with a healthier, *flourishing* life. Through online access to a survey, a ratio of one's positivity and negativity is calculated to identify whether a life is merely being lived or is flourishing.

Reivich, too, has collaborated several times with Seligman, their focus, however, being the subject of resilience. They are considered to be a leading expert in promoting and fostering resilience in youth and young adults. Through their many publications on the subject of resilience, Reivich has proven that resilience is something that can be learned and improved upon so that individuals can overcome the vicissitudes of daily life and flourish. In the book *The Resilience Factor* (Reivich & Shatte, 2002) seven techniques for enhancing resilience are identified: emotional awareness and regulation, impulse control, realistic optimism, flexible thinking, self-efficacy, empathy, and the ability to reach out.

Post's research and writings have looked at living life by *the golden rule* and how being a good person can positively impact one's physical life. Post's philosophy on the good life, through the study of Positive Psychology, is of love being made visible through character traits such as loyalty, helping, forgiveness, respect, and compassion (Post, 2017).

Theoretical Influences of Positive Psychology

Strength-based approaches are strongly rooted in solid theoretical ground. Constructivism is often recognized as a philosophy within the field of education and of knowledge itself. Piaget is perhaps the most notable Constructivist theorist. He focused on how humans make meaning from their experiences and ideas. Piaget saw education as an ongoing and active process. He valued a child's ability to learn through play and exploration and saw the environment in which an individual was exposed to as playing a key role in internalizing that information into knowledge that could be accessed (Wadsworth, 2004). In this way the environment is an important element of the learning

system. The two key processes for learning new concepts, as identified by Piaget, were assimilation and accommodation. For information to be assimilated an individual did not have to change the existing understanding previously learned within the confines of their own environment. This understanding could either support their previous knowledge and beliefs about their environment or could oppose those views. Accommodation, on the other hand, is the process of changing one's view of the world to incorporate the new information that is being presented (Mooney, 2013). This theoretical construct plays a key role in understanding the active process of learning. Its understanding is necessary in the other theoretical influences that led to the shift towards Positive Psychology.

Humanistic Psychology Theory holds to the notion that all people are inherently good. Viewing individuals in this optimistic perspective further encourages the notion of viewing *the self* holistically rather than as a sum of all of its parts. Through self-exploration rather than the study of human behaviour that was encouraged by theorists such as Freud and Skinner, Humanistic theory is driven by an individual's natural need for self-actualization through the expression of individual ideas, notions, and creativity. Maslow's theory of self-actualization posited that individuals were driven by a hierarchy of five basic needs: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualization (Zhao, 2018). Rogers later added to this theory by stating that an individual requires the proper environmental conditions in order to grow and realize their full potential. This environment is required to be genuine, accepting, and empathetic, allowing for the individual to feel a sense of unconditional belonging and that their voice was being heard (Bohart & Greening, 2001). Rogers is known for having taken a more person-centered approach with his research, counseling, and therapy. The person-centered approach

acknowledges that individuals have an innate proclivity to self-actualize by means of growth and development. While he recognized that the majority of individuals have already grown and developed from a physical standpoint without any intervention needed, he conceded that further psychological growth and development sometimes requires some sort of therapeutic intervention. This can be achieved through unconditional acceptance, congruence, and genuine understanding from the outside world and from within the individual's psyche (Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2013).

Deci et al. (1999) are positive psychologists who have contributed vastly to the field of Positive Psychology through the development of their self-determination theory. Much like the theoretical roots of its origin the self-determination theory is a theory of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It has already been studied and proven that humans are innately motivated. While there are external factors such as reward systems that can be used to incentivize individuals there are intrinsically inherent yearnings to learn based on interests, curiosities, and values. The theory of self-determination looks at how cultures and environments both support and hinder these motivations. Deci & Ryan theorized that the proper motivation of an individual is determined by their experience of three contributing factors: competency, autonomy, and relatedness. To that end this theory presupposes that if any or all of these three psychological needs are not supported within the individual's environment there will be significant impact on that individual's well-being. Deci, Koestner, & Ryan (1999) defined autonomy as an individual's ability to initiate and self-regulate their own behaviour and learning. A student who is driven to learn through curiosity rather than necessity is considered to be intrinsically motivated. Competency consists of one's ability to affect their own environment. The subsequent

change in their environment produced from their actions provides an inherent sense of self-satisfaction and ownership over their learning and personal contributions (Deci & Moller, 2005). Relatedness refers to one's feeling of belonging and acceptance within a social group.

Several theorists have previously identified one of these three elements as being crucial to the process of learning, as was discussed earlier with Rogers' Humanistic Theory. It is clear in reviewing these important contributing theories that they have greatly influenced the movement which has identified the need for more strength-based methods with which to build upon student competencies.

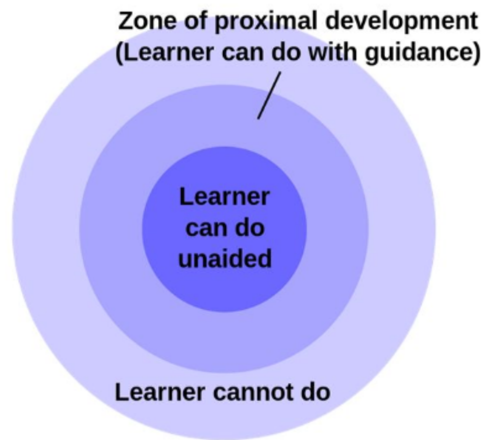
Vygotsky's earlier contributions to the theoretical discussion of education in childhood have had a continued impact on many aspects of teacher training, and further professional development as well as departmental, district level and school community developed paradigms. His theories were grounded in the belief that social and cognitive structures work together in the building of a child's understanding of the world in which they live. Within these social structures Vygotsky recognized that a child's understanding of the world was based on their life experiences as well as the values and ideals held by those closest to them such as family, community, and school. A child's learning comes not only from adults providing experiences and modeling appropriate language and behaviour. Vygotsky saw the importance of children learning from one another. The language, social negotiations and limits set on play by children collectively all contribute to a child's construction of knowledge (Mooney, 2013).

Likely the most well-known theoretical contribution would be what Vygotsky described as an individual's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD of any

individual learner marks the distance between what they can easily do on their own with the proper guidance and what is beyond their current abilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

Figure 2

Zone of Proximal Development



McLeod, 2018

Vygotsky believed that students need to be challenged in their learning and that with proper support structures, which he referred to as scaffolding, students could successfully complete increasingly more challenging tasks within their level of cognitive ability. Mooney (2013) asserts that Vygotsky's notion of developmental readiness was more flexible than that of other earlier theorists. He believed that through careful planning and proper scaffolding educators could extend a student's knowledge through activities and experiences that stretched their competencies.

Principles of Strength-based Education

Literature published in the field of both positive psychology and strength-based practices have identified several fundamental principles of strength-based practice within the early education system. These principles can and should serve both as beacons to guide the development of district and departmental policies as well as tools for educators

to use in order to better direct and reflect upon their current practices (Province of New Brunswick, 2016; Province of Alberta, 2013; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005).

• *There must be an absolute belief that every student has potential*.

With this common belief system in place, school communities are able to develop plans for the benefit of all students, both individually as well as collectively. Acknowledging the strengths and potential of each student is crucial to the attainment of their own individual potentials.

• *What an educator or entire education system focuses on becomes a student's reality*.

Much of today's educational climate runs on a deficit-based model. In terms of both academic and behavioural performance, many struggling students are already aware of their own deficits. When an educator or an entire system focuses on these same deficits throughout the school career of a student, this becomes part of their identity. To focus on that same student's strengths empowers them to grow, believing that they are capable of learning and reaching their full potential.

• *Strength-based practices require consistent mindfulness of the language that is being used towards students and within the classroom environment.*

Strength-based practice, particularly in the context of the inclusive classroom, requires consistent monitoring of the use of intentional and strength specific language to further encourage and build a student's capacity for a lifelong love of learning and self-actualization.

• *An absolute belief that change is inevitable and that all students can and will be successful*.

In moving from a deficit to a strength-based system of practice there is the potential for great change. When educators are teaching to a student's strengths, growth and change will inevitably occur. While not all students may have the same potential for learning in terms of specific curricular outcomes or targeted academic achievement, all students, regardless of their challenges, have the ability to learn. Without this understanding and belief, one cannot truly call themselves strength-based

•*These positive changes can only occur through the creation of safe classroom and school environments as well as the creation of authentic relationships.*

To use a strength-based pedagogical approach in education, time must be properly invested in building relationships with students, both in terms of the individual student as well as the entire classroom dynamic. Relationships built on trust, understanding and respect will lead to the creation of a classroom environment where students are willing to take the necessary risks to learn new things and develop their own skills

• *What students think about themselves, and their reality is primary.*

While the language used by educators can have an impact on student learning and their self-concept, it is equally as important to recognize and accept that a student's preconceived notion of self is the only truth that matters to them. While a student's learning trajectory is not concretely predetermined, their mindset can play a critical role in learning, motivation, engagement, and self-actualization. Simply rejecting a student's belief about their ability to learn will not lend to their ability to redefine themselves. It is through patience, determination, continuous modeling of strength-based language as well as opportunities for students to display their strengths and grow in knowledge that this reality may begin to shift to one of a more positive, strength-based nature

• *Students will have more confidence and be more willing to take the first step towards learning if they are invited to begin with what they already know*.

Students are generally aware of the things they are unable to do and what they do not know. While learning is about an individual's ability to take risks, make mistakes and continue learning despite these mistakes, this is not an easy feat for anyone. It is more realistic to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and strengths by inviting them to practice what they have already mastered. From there, a gradual insertion of more complex tasks and concepts can continue

•*Capacity building is a process and a goal*.

Learning is a lifelong endeavor. It is not something that can be achieved overnight, nor is it something that can be given a specific end point. Building a student's capacity to learn and build upon their strengths and talents is a process. From this process a student can grow into a productive member of society, with many pertinent competencies to contribute throughout their life

• *It is important to value differences and the essential need for collaboration*.

One of the most remarkable elements of the strength-based approach is that each individual's strengths can be quite diverse in nature. It is important to celebrate these differences. Recognizing these differences will serve to highlight the importance of collaboration; using each other's strengths to achieve a task or improve upon something that has already be created.

(Province of New Brunswick, 2016; Alberta Mentoring Partnership, 2013; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005)**.**

Relevance of Inclusion and Strength-based Approaches

The main themes uncovered through attempts to define inclusion primarily reflect a deficit-based assumption that those students with physical, cognitive, or learning disabilities are the primary or sole focus of inclusion efforts within the mainstream classroom. Further exploration of the philosophy of inclusion and its original intent within the school system, however, looks beyond exceptional learners and takes into account what is best for the education of all students within the classroom setting. Inclusion is a model that allows all students the opportunity to learn within the same physical environment and participate in activities geared to their abilities as a means to reach their full potential. In moving away from the current deficit-based model, a student's ability to reach their full potential within the education system and beyond is accomplished through recognizing each individual's strengths and talents.

There are many relevant applications to what is now being recognized as a strength-based approach to education. Educators must take a vested interest in each individual student and build a rapport with them as a means of uncovering their individual talents. Students will become more motivated and engaged in the learning process if they are learning not only about things of interest to them but also in a way that empowers them through the use of their strengths. Embarking on the educational journey from a student-centered, strength-based approach is also a means of building student confidence. The question then becomes: How can an educator identify and foster the strengths of each of their students, taking into account the various student needs and overall compositions of today's classrooms? This is quite often an area many educators struggle to address. The various frameworks that have become popularized in recent years provide several approaches to achieve this end. The models that will be discussed

have become popularized within the larger global context in the field of inclusive education. These evidence-based models serve to guide educators in incorporating student strengths and abilities in all areas of their learning.

Strength-based universal practices within inclusive classrooms

Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences

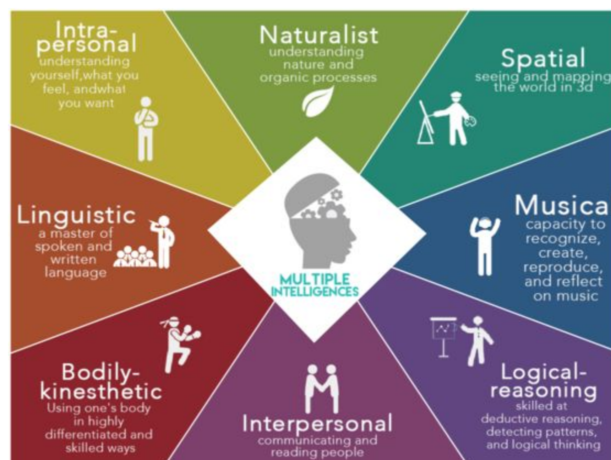
The Multiple Intelligences model is one that comes from Harvard University through the work of Gardner. The proposed model was first introduced in 1983 in the book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Gardner, 1983). Gardner deemed that the measuring of intelligence through standardized methods such as IQ tests was far too limited. Likewise, traditional schooling environments focused primarily on linguistic and logical-reasoning forms of intelligence. He proposed, rather, eight distinct types of intelligence that individuals possess at varying degrees that highlight the importance of acknowledging learner diversity and individual talents and strengths (Gardner, 1997).

Linguistic intelligence refers to the mastery of the spoken and written word. Individuals with a proficiency for language are able to use language effectively including recognizing the meaning of words (Azid et al., 2016), participating in discussions on numerous topics, writing various types of written prose and listening to varying opinions. Logical-mathematical intelligence refers to one's ability to reason, calculate and solve problems involving numbers. Gardner also saw this as a strengthened knowledge in recognizing patterns and relationships between abstract symbols and various pieces of information (Stanford, 2003). Visual-spatial intelligence is often considered to involve having a natural affinity in artistic domains. Individuals are aware of space and are able

to recreate or represent elements of their reality into design using shape, space, and color. Those with a strong bodily kinesthetic intelligence have an awareness of and ability to use their body's movement to express emotion and creativity. Musical intelligence consists of the learner's ability to create, understand, and appreciate the various elements of music such as rhythm, tone, and melody (Azid et al., 2016). Interpersonal intelligence incorporates social skills such as the ability to interact with others, work well in a group atmosphere and be sensitive to others' feelings and needs. Intrapersonal intelligence, on the other hand, involves learners being *self-smart* (Gardiner, 1997). These individuals have a good knowledge and understanding of themselves. They recognize and understand their feelings and emotions, often engaging in self-reflection. Finally, Gardner identified the eighth intelligence as being naturalist. Possessing a naturalistic intelligence consists of having a sensitivity to the various elements of nature and an understanding of its various species. They are able to recognize and classify environmental objects found in nature (Stanford, 2003).

Figure 3

Multiple Intelligences



Crook, 2019

Since its original proposal almost four decades ago, many schools across the world have adopted this, or modified versions of this theory as a method of planning lessons. Various types of intelligences are incorporated in an attempt to reach more, if not all, of their students. This does not mean that each lesson must incorporate all eight of the intelligences as identified by Gardner. Rather, educators should be cognizant of the various learning styles of their students in their classrooms and incorporate the intelligences accordingly. Requiring a student to sit and write a narrative independently reaches students of linguistic and intrapersonal intelligences. Playing music softly in the background as students work may engage the more musically inclined students as well. Incorporating movement into lessons, either through guided "brain breaks" (Perera et al., 2015) or moving from station to station will more actively engage the bodily kinesthetic learners. Research conducted by Aziz et al. (2016) found that providing middle school aged students the opportunity to experience learning through a variety of carefully planned enrichment models geared to tap into individual multiple intelligences served to stimulate and motivate learners to work towards their fullest potential. (Aziz et al., 2016).

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a model out of Harvard University developed by Rose and Meyer (2002). It has been implemented as one type of inclusionary framework in various countries around the world, particularly in North America. It is one of the primary frameworks that has been embraced by the Province of New Brunswick. Its purpose was to address learner differences by removing certain barriers, both curricular and environmental, to meet the needs of all students within the common classroom setting (Katz & Sokal, 2016). It stands to reason that students,

regardless of physical, social, and academic abilities, would require learning to happen in a variety of ways within an environment that promotes the various needs and learning styles of all students. Educators, until recently, were not provided with professional training to meet all of these needs. This resulted in some students being *left behind.* Students require an element of choice in their instruction to maximize meaningful learning. The framework is divided into three key principles of education: engagement, representation and action, and expression. Engagement, defined by Lowrey et al. (2017), addresses the *why* of learning. Representation, in contrast, addresses the *what* of learning. Finally, the principle of action and expression addresses how learners are able to learn. Within the examination of UDL Lowrey et al. (2017) focused not simply on student engagement and achievement but also on the impact this framework had on the educators using it. It was reported that teacher perception of efficacy and their observable ability to reach learners in need increased dramatically. As well, the promotion of teamwork among staff to ensure student and professional success was heightened. This teamwork and collaboration necessitated the discussion about inclusionary practices available and being used as well as other possible strategies (Lowrey et al., 2017). Each of these identified principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression are separated into the three incremental elements of learning: access, building and internalizing (CAST, 2018). Within the principle of engagement students receive access to learning by being provided options to develop their individual interests. This not only increases student autonomy and engagement through personally relevant and valuable learning topics but also reduces the risk of distraction. Students begin to build knowledge and understanding by increasing their efforts and persistence in completing various tasks. These strategies

can be seen through varying the complexity and demands of tasks, forming heightened goals and encouraging collaboration. Students are able to internalize their engagement through learned self-regulation. This can be achieved through the vocalization of clear expectations and beliefs by the educator. Educators can also support students in the learning and development of effective coping skills and strategies as well as the process of self-assessment (CAST, 2018).

Figure 4

Universal Design for Learning

CAST, 2011

Students are able to develop their representation of what they are learning following the same method of learning. Students access their learning beginning with their perception of the content they are learning. It is here that educators can use some very tangible

strategies to allow students access to learning content. This can be achieved through the visual and graphic way in which lessons are displayed. This can also be achieved through the use of auditory sound systems in the class which allow students to hear instructions and content being more clearly delivered by the teacher. Students build their representation of learning through the various elements of language: clarifying vocabulary, sentence structure, decoding of text and developing universal ways to communicate across language through the use of gestures. Students internalize their representation of language through comprehension. In this more complex stage of learning students are able to, with the support of teacher modeling, display abilities for creative thinking and identifying patterns, ideas, and relationships as well as through generalizing information (CAST, 2018).

One of the many ways to access action and expression of learning is to provide several options of physical actions or strategies made available by the classroom teacher. It is now understood that students have varying needs to optimize their individual learning often requiring different ways to respond to the content being presented. Within the classroom this could be the use of strategies such as providing increased wait time, allowing students to process and consider information before responding. It is also important that students have the appropriate access to tools, resources, and assistive technology. Students are able to construct their learning by being given the option to express their learning through various forms of media: PowerPoint, drawing, music, and drama as well as being provided a variety of supports to help with construction: spell check, text to speech predictor, calculators, and mapping tools. Finally, students are able to internalize their ability to express their learning by having the teacher provide options

for executive functioning. Educators can guide students to set appropriate goals, support planning and management of information and resources (CAST, 2018).

Personalized Learning

> "Learning starts where the learners are, not where we want them to be or where the curriculum imagines them to be" (Rickabaugh, 2016).

Personalized Learning (PL) is a model that extends beyond the scope of differentiated learning. Unlike differentiation which focuses on the use of distinctive strategies to teach students in the way in which they best learn departmentally mandated educational outcomes, PL focuses on individual student competencies, interests, and strengths. Maslow theorized that individuals all have an innate desire to realize their potential and achieve self-actualization (Zhao, 2018). Individuals are also naturally motivated to learn and improve (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Through the active use of PL, learners complete an initial learner profile which serves as an assessment highlighting who the student is as a learner as well as an individual. From this, students are able to understand what, why and how they should learn (Rickabaugh et al., 2017) through documented strengths, competencies, learning preferences as well as academic areas of need.

PL permits students to shift from the passive role of a learning to a partner and leader of their education experience (Rickabaugh et al., 2017). It is suggested that traditional education has forgotten about students' abilities to organize and manage their learning (Zhao, 2018). This renewed shift in educational paradigm provides academic accountability of curricular content while at the same time providing students with learning opportunities fitting of their strengths, interests, and competency development.

This prompts a shift in educators as well as they move into the role of co-creator of learning plans for individual students. Having a strong understanding of individual students' skills, capacities and needs, educators can shift their professional responsibilities to ones that enable all students to grow in their own learning experience. Rickabaugh (2016) writes that noticeable shifts can be observed in teacher practice. Rather than planning lessons educators are designing learning activities. Instead of providing information to students' teachers are curating learning resources. Rather than employing established teaching practices educators are employing more effective learner-focused practices. An example of such a strategy is that of customized responsive instruction. In contrast to resorting to traditional whole class teaching strategies, Rickabaugh urges educators to first discover what kinds of instruction each student needs, taking their readiness, strengths, needs and interests into account (Rickabaugh, 2016).

There are many frameworks that have been designed and can be used to first initiate a shift to a PL model. Rickabaugh (2016) proposes a honeycomb model for the scaling and sustaining of PL. Working from the inside out three core components are identified as being the center of successful implementation of PL: Learner Profiles, Customized Learning Plans and Proficiency-Based Progress.

Figure 5

Personalized Learning

Rickabaugh, 2016

Learner profiles are co-created between educators and learners and are comprised of rich and current information about the learner as a means of identifying the strengths, capacities, skills and needs necessary to successfully progress in individualized learning pathways. It is suggested that these profiles contain information regarding student demographics, academic status, learning related skill sets as well as potential learning drivers. Customized learning paths allow students both voice and choice in regard to their learning. Again, these are co-created between learners and educators to extend beyond traditional compliance of learning standards and curriculum mandates to direct and focus meaningful student learning. Finally, proficiency-based progress is a means of tracking student progress through various means of assessment. Beyond summative assessment, which should be a marker of achieved mastery in any given subject, various forms of formative assessment such as self-surveys, checklists, and rubrics should be used to gauge learning and progress, and to reframe learning goals as needed (Rickabaugh,

2016). The use of constructive and timely feedback is another way of ensuring that student learning is being intentionally monitored and given necessary guidance.

Another recent framework has been presented to the Province of New Brunswick by researchers Peterson and Morrison (2016) which identifies components of PL as well as indicators allowing educators to identify their practices on a five-point scale ranging from Pre-Awareness to Sustained and Embedded Practice. Peterson and Morrison identified four essential components for the successful implementation of sustainability of Personalized Learning: PL Model, PL Strategies, PL Relationships and PL Progress Checks. Their PL Model denotes a vision and paradigm to be based on strength-based philosophies and assumptions about student abilities and learning habits (Lopez & Louis, 2009). It also identifies the need for organization frameworks to be put in place to manage current research, promising practices as well as policies and guidelines surrounding PL. PL Strategies are recognized as incorporating the use of multiple pathways to learning, the enabled use of technology as a further tool for learning as well as evolving PL portfolios for each student. The third component of PL relationships is a unique element which takes student well-being and social-emotional learning into account. This component involves having external partnerships and agencies in place to support student needs in terms of comprehensive health and well-being. Finally, PL Progress Checks recognize the need for educators to use meaningful means of assessment and monitoring tools to be continuously gauging student learning and progress.

Social-Emotional Learning

There has been increased dialogue within the field of education voicing the need to balance academic achievement alongside social competencies allowing students to

navigate social situations in an ever-changing world. Social emotional learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring the competencies necessary to recognize and regulate emotions, develop empathy for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and effectively handle challenging situations. SEL competencies consist of skills that foster positive health practices and engaged citizenship, as well as school success. These skills can be taught and learned through the establishment of nurturing and caring learning environments. Active learning approaches frequently used in SEL provide opportunities for learners to exercise these skills in a way that can be generalized across curriculum areas and social contexts. When such opportunities are provided, students are able to practice and hone life skills that foster positive attitudes, behaviours and thinking processes (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007).

SEL consists of five separate competency domains:

Self-awareness: The ability to accurately recognize thoughts and emotions and how they influence behaviour. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and holding a sense of confidence and optimism.

Self-management: The ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviours effectively across various situations and contexts. This includes managing stress and controlling impulses, as well as working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

Social awareness: The ability to consider the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Relationship skills: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, constructively negotiating conflict, and seeking and offering help when needed.

Responsible decision-making: The ability to make healthy choices about personal behaviour and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms and the well-being of self and others (CASEL, 2015).

Internationally, although particularly relevant within the Canadian educational context, SEL has begun to provide an organizing framework that encompasses many different educational programs promoting the development of these skills. Programs focusing on character education, violence prevention, anti-bullying, drug prevention and empathy towards others, as well as issues around the subject of school discipline have arisen to promote and aid in the development of the necessary competencies identified for effective SEL. SEL has proven to lead to improved student attitudes and positive behavioural changes, as well as improvements in academic achievement. Schools are social and, as such, learning should be achieved through a social process which includes collaboration with educators, peers, family, and community (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007).

Positive Mental Health

> The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) (2016) describes positive mental health as: the capacity for individuals to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance their ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges with which they are faced. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity (PHAC, 2016, p. 2).

Positive mental health protects against many health challenges which has traditionally included mental illness, disease, and shortened life expectancy (New

Brunswick Health Council, 2016). According to Deci and Ryan (2008), elements of positive mental health contribute to psychological wellness and increased readiness to pursue personal goals, change and growth. These same authors contest that individuals with positive mental health are more apt "to think about and act on personal decisions to contribute to emotional and physical growth" (Morrison & Peterson, 2013, p. 4).

The guiding assumptions of positive mental health in health and education, as noted by Morrison and Peterson (2015), include the belief that youth want to do well and have strengths that will flourish when supported; they must feel engaged and empowered in order for positive development to occur; the environment in which youth live and learn influences their sense of well-being; authentic relationships with adults and peers must be characterized by unconditional caring; and affirmation and empathy are essential. Lippman et al. (2011) note the importance of including children as active participants in the decision-making and monitoring processes around their own well-being. Cultivating children's strengths, "*assets, positive relationships, beliefs, morals, behaviours and capacities*" will ensure that they have the resources they need to be able to grow successfully throughout their entire lives.

Mental health programs and services within school settings have traditionally focused on addressing concerns related to the psychological well-being of children and youth. This has often been done through the identification of relevant risk factors, and the delivery of appropriate intervention and support services, alongside promotional programs aimed to reduce stigmas associated with mental health conditions. These approaches have often emphasized the challenges associated with mental health-related concerns in children and youth, more specifically mental illness, as well as the

interventions needed for remediation. More current research across the fields of both health and education asserts the importance of evolving beyond problem-focused approaches towards ones that embrace a more positive view of mental health. This shift involves the acknowledgement that the state of psychological well-being of children and youth is not influenced through the denial of existing problems and risk factors; it can, however, be impacted through strength-based approaches highlighting the existence of important protective factors that contribute to positive growth and development in youth. When approached from this strength-based perspective there is greater potential to benefit the mental health of individuals, and communities (Mantoura, 2014), promoting resilience, flourishing and more.

Resiliency is the demonstration of positive adaptation of children and youth despite challenges, obstacles, or areas of risk that they may encounter within their social contexts and living circumstances (Windle, 2011). Recent research suggests that resilient individuals: feel appreciated and valued for their individual strengths; possess positive problem-solving skills; apply effective coping strategies when encountering challenges in life and seek assistance from others when support is needed. Resilience has also been defined as the capacity to successfully adapt in the face of adversity and can be applied to individuals as well as systems such as families and schools (ACT, 2016). PHAC (2012) notes resilience is influenced by the three overarching concepts: a sense of *being*, the way we are and how we feel about ourselves; a sense of *belonging*, the way we relate to others and to our social, physical, and cultural environments; and a sense of *becoming*, what we do in our lives, our personal life goals and how we develop in pursuit of these aspirations (PHAC, 2012).

Support for school-based mental health approaches is growing at the provincial, national, and international levels. Children typically spend six or more hours a day within their educational settings (Morrison & Peterson, 2015b; 2014), making schools a central community resource (Cooper & Guya, 2013). Schools have the potential to reach children who would not otherwise have access to education about healthy habits; access to services or opportunities to build knowledge about and further develop their existing strengths (Morrison & Peterson, 2013). Within the school context, positive mental health promotion should focus on enhancing protective factors that contribute to the social-emotional growth of children and youth. Protective factors are elements that are present in an individual's life and serve to shield and moderate them in the face of adversity, reducing the risk of negative outcomes (ACT, 2016). They are resources that youth can administer while navigating daily challenges as they are encountered. Protective factors at the individual level include easy-going temperament, self-confidence, social-competence, problem-solving skills as well as autonomy, a sense of responsibility and hope for their own lives. Protective factors at the environmental level can be categorized through family, school community, and societal levels. Family level protective factors include engaged and responsive parenting style with high but realistic expectations. Community level protective factors include access to caring adults outside the family, the opportunity to engage in meaningful participation of groups, teams, clubs. Larger societal resources: create bonds with school, have access to health care, live in safe communities where neighbours trust and look out for each other, supported by child-and family-friendly public policies (ACT, 2016; Morrison & Peterson, 2013).

The promotion of positive mental health in teaching embeds messages of inclusion and support for all students and communicates the message that everyone has an equal right to learn (Rapp, 2014; Morrison & Peterson, 2013). Positive mental health promotion includes actions such as the implementation of supportive and inclusive public and school policies; the development of safe and caring environments within school and community settings; the provision of direct instruction for students on skills and strategies that enhance their coping and problem-solving capacities; ensuring engagement and mobilization of community members in promoting protective factors; and the development of collaborative and integrated services and supports that share a common vision for positive mental health promotion (Rickwood et al., 2007).

When positive mental health is promoted through strength-based, whole-school approaches youth flourish (Cooper & Guya, 2013; Morrison & Peterson, 2013). Comprehensive programs in schools are the most consistently effective approach in influencing children's development and behaviour (Jané-Llopis et al., 2005). Comprehensive school health:

- Affirms that physically and emotionally healthy children and youth are more likely to reach their academic potential
- Recognises that the school setting has the potential to positively contribute to students' positive mental health
- Promotes the belief that healthy lifestyle choices positively impact children's and youth's physical health and emotional well-being
- Integrates health into all aspects of school and learning
- Bridges health and education concerns and systems

- Requires the support and collaboration of families, community members, and service providers (Morrison & Peterson, 2013).

Student Competency Models

Competency based education, in contrast to the more traditional intentions of classroom-based learning, focuses not on the transfer of knowledge but on the mastery of global competencies that allow students to acquire knowledge on their own and to develop capacities allowing them to contribute to their own community and global realities. Global competencies assist in meeting the continuously changing demands of life, work, and learning; being active and responsive within local and global communities while leveraging new technologies, engaging in meaningful and diverse global relationships, and acting responsibly in the face of challenges and issues. Looking to the future of our students in an everchanging global climate, there is a need for educational communities to provide students with the knowledge, values, skills, and attitudes that they will need to become lifelong learners, understanding global interdependence issues and developing the ability to be active global citizens. This is achieved by providing students with a variety of learning opportunities that foster their abilities to think and act as informed and critical thinking global citizens. Global competencies exist interdependently and can be leveraged in a variety of contexts. They contribute to areas of educational success, relationships, employment, health, and well-being.

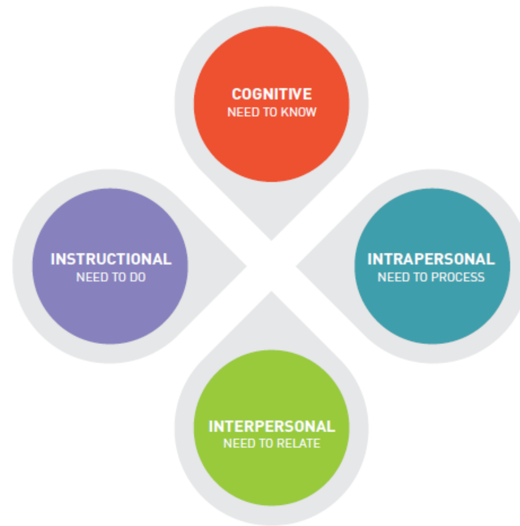
Critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship, self-awareness, self-direction, collaboration, communication, and global citizenship are the global competencies which make up the four pillars of education as identified by UNESCO (2011). In the UNESCO report *Learning: the treasure within* (UNESCO,

2011), Delors (1996) recognizes four pillars for education of the 21st Century: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. These pillars correspond closely with the frequently used competency fields: domain competencies, methodological competencies, personal competencies, and social competencies.

Competencies utilize skills and abilities beyond those of a more cognitive or academic nature, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and a variety of social skills (Makulova et al., 2015). There are several different models that have been created by educational researchers to promote the growth of competencies necessary for students to flourish beyond their formal education experiences. Internationally, education systems have been developing frameworks as a means of bringing student strengths to the forefront of the discussion. Jobs for the Future (2015) collaboratively developed a framework for educators as a means of providing refocused personalized, learner-centered teaching practices. This framework is led by guiding principles that acknowledge that student competencies should be embedded holistically and supported by the school culture which believes that learning happens anywhere and at any time. Likewise, the framework identifies the various commonly cited competencies through four primary domains: cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and instructional.

Figure 6

Student Competencies

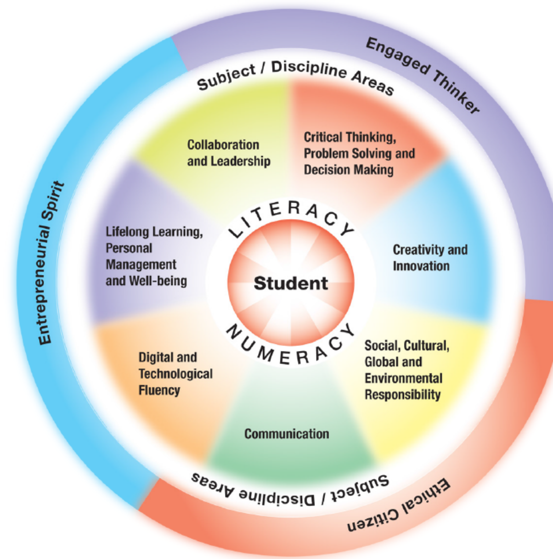


Jobs for the Future, 2015

The province of Alberta has developed a similar framework in which student competencies are the focus of embedded practices and teaching models. The diagram below was developed by Alberta Education (2011) as a way to illustrate their competency-based student learning framework. This student-centered approach does not deny the importance of foundational educational subjects such as literacy and numeracy. Rather, it aligns these components with “an interrelated set of attitudes, skills and knowledge” that can be applied to several different life contexts for successful learning.

Figure 7

Competency-based Learning



Alberta Education, 2011

Individual competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, communication, digital fluency, and collaboration are just some of the competencies identified as contributing to engaged learners and ethical members of society. Explicit instruction focusing on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills provides students with the opportunity and experience to review, analyze and assess information with an appreciation of other points of view as a means of making good decisions. Developing an individual's creativity fosters a student's natural optimism and curiosity. Having a focus on communication goes beyond reading and writing and entails having students understand and interpret the thoughts, ideas, and emotions of others as well as their own (Alberta Education, 2011).

More locally, the Francophone School Districts in New Brunswick have also developed a framework based on desired competencies they wish their students to attain

before leaving the public-school system. Much like in Alberta, their focus extends beyond the academic requirements traditionally focused on in education. The Francophone School Districts have categorized the competencies into three domains: social, cognitive, and communicative. Within each category competency descriptors and goals are included to identify how each of these competencies fosters well-being and resilience in the individual students (province du Nouveau-Brunswick, 2018). These are just some of the ways in which having these competencies embedded within the provincial curricula will enable explicit and intentional learning opportunities to provide students with a truly inclusive educational experience contributing to their holistic success and development.

Relevance of a Dual-Dimensional View of Inclusionary Education

Although there is evidence that strength-based concepts and practices are being implemented to varying degrees within support-oriented approaches to inclusion, there continues to be a lack of specificity related to how such approaches for promoting flourishing in students may be effectively operationalized within school-based or district-wide inclusionary models. Within current literature related to inclusionary educational approaches there appears to be an absence of any unifying framework which engage, promote, or elaborate the application of strengths in conjunction with support-related structures and strategies. It is for this reason, that this research proposal is proposing the investigation of dual dimensional approaches to inclusionary practices based on Keyes' model (Keyes, 2002) which delineates both support and flourishing related continuums.

The term *flourishing* has been used frequently with respect to individual well-being and satisfaction and has been adopted by several leaders in research to describe a

state of being where individuals are at their best and poised to meet their full potential. Authors such as Keyes (2007) and Seligman (2011) use the term *flourishing* in their respective fields of research as a means of describing the positivity in living life. From the mental and public health perspective, Carney and Parr (2014) characterize the experience of flourishing as “positive emotions and relationships, as well as a sense of connection, purpose, and accomplishment” (p. 2).

The World Health Organization (2004) defined *mental health* as a state of well-being where people are able to realize their full potential while successfully coping with the stresses of everyday life. Mental health and mental illness have traditionally been viewed as distinct elements located at opposite ends of a single dimensional continuum.

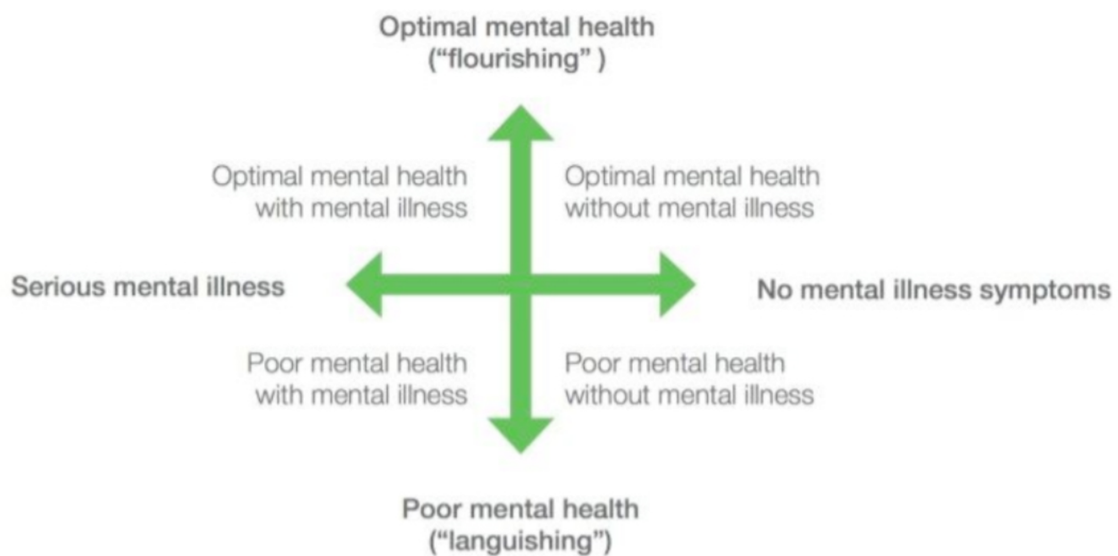
More recent research has emerged showing that those diagnosed with mental illness can still experience high levels of well-being and, likewise, those without a mental illness can show low levels of well-being. A two-continua model conceptualized by Keyes (2007) emphasizes the important distinction that the absence of mental illness does not automatically indicate the presence of mental health. Instead, individuals can be flourishing or languishing depending on their individual functioning, social well-being, and mental health issues (Keyes, 2002). He defined flourishing to be the accentuation of the positive aspects of well-being through continuous promotion and maintenance of genuine mental health. By contrast, an individual with an absence of these positive emotions and complete mental health would be considered to be *languishing* in life. Those who are neither languishing nor flourishing are considered to be in moderate mental health (Westerhof & Keyes, 2009). While mental health and mental illness are strongly correlated, Keyes asserts that they belong on two separate and distinct continua

(Keyes, 2002) Keyes' research (2007) conceptualizes two dimensions within his model of wellbeing and positive growth. "Rather than forming a single bipolar dimension, health and illness are correlated unipolar dimensions that, together, form a complete state of mental health" (Keyes, 2005, p. 539).

One dimension involves the recognition of personal challenges and the need for individual supports, and the second one highlights people's potential for positive development when provided with the necessary environmental conditions. A complete picture of mental health is one which examines the combination of emotional, psychological, and social well-being of the individual (Westerhof & Keyes, 2009).

Figure 8

Dual-dimensional Model



Keyes, 2002

This salutogenic approach to viewing mental health is characterized by the presence of positive feelings, thinking and behaviours. This view is aligned theoretically with strength-based approaches to mental health (Keyes, 2007). The traditional view of

mental health, conversely, often referred to as the pathogenic approach, views mental health as the absence of mental illness. This view is consistent with more clinical or deficit-based approaches to mental health (Keyes, 2007). Keyes' Continuum Model combines the salutogenic and pathogenic approaches to mental health in Figure 8 using the horizontal axis to denote the pathogenic view, while the vertical axis is rooted in the salutogenic approach to mental health.

With mental health being defined by organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO, 2004) as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively…and is able to make a contribution to their community" (p. 10), well-being has been examined through two traditional theoretical concepts. Hedonic well-being, which Keyes has termed as emotional well-being (Westerhof & Keyes, 2009) consists of feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and interest in life. Complete well-being though, as conceptualized by Keyes as being multi-dimensional, requires the examination of other aspects of life. Linked closely with elements of Ryan and Deci's (2002) Self-Determination Theory, eudaimonic well-being is also examined, focusing primarily on the realization of an individual's own potential and optimal functioning. Westerhof & Keyes (2009) refers to psychological well-being as being broken down into six elements:

1) *Self-acceptance*: a positive and accepting attitude towards oneself as an individual
2) *Purpose in life:* goals and beliefs providing an individual with a sense of direction and meaning in life
3) *Autonomy:* self-direction being guided by one's own internal standards

4) *Positive relations with others:* having satisfying and functional personal relationships consisting of empathy and intimacy
5) *Environmental mastery:* capacity to manage one's environmental surroundings based on need
6) *Personal growth:* possessing insight into one's own potential for self-development (p. 111)

The final area of social well-being has been identified by Westerhof & Keyes (2009) through elements such as:

1) *social coherence*: ability to make meaning of societal events
2) *social acceptance*: possessing a positive attitude towards others while also acknowledging challenges
3) *social actualization*: maintaining the belief that one's community has the potential for change and evolution
4) *social contribution*: possessing the sense that one's contributions are impactful and valued within their community
5) *social integration*: possessing a sense of belonging within a community (p. 111)

Keyes (2002) argues that a combination of emotional, psychological, and social well-being is required for an individual to be considered mentally healthy. Keyes' dual-dimensional model has been widely recognized and adopted as a framework to guide policy and practice in the field of mental health in public, private, and community sectors. To date, the use of Keyes' framework has not been examined or investigated in terms of its potential to illuminate current theoretical perspectives and applications within inclusionary educational models.

Our education system is currently operating primarily from a deficit-based model. We have highly skilled and trained professionals providing various degrees of support services and interventions to students who, despite these efforts, continue to appear to be languishing academically as well as socially and emotionally. These supports, though, target areas where students are struggling and often do not take into account the competencies and strengths that individual students possess. The various studies mentioned throughout the review of current literature have identified the value in strength-based practices within inclusive education, particularly those that serve to develop students' global competencies. While these support services take into account one dimension of inclusionary education, I propose the existence of a second dimension, similar to that identified through the work of Keyes. Much like mental health and mental illness existing on two separate continua, prevention and treatment of mental illnesses will not always result in more mentally healthy individuals. Within the inclusive education paradigm, this second dimension consists of the various features contributing to the establishment of positive learning environments that remain to be explored. Supports and services can be offered to struggling students at the right time and with the right intensity. Failure to identify and provide the proper environmental conditions to our learners, though, will not necessarily result in students who are flourishing within the education system. Understanding the nature and etiology of strengths and competencies of students who are flourishing already within the system, can provide insight as to how promoting strengths and competencies can better serve and bolster all learners within the inclusionary education system (Keyes, 2002).

Moving Towards Strengths in Inclusion

Our inclusionary system currently operates from a problem focused and support-oriented position. Students' needs are assessed based on what they are lacking rather than on the qualities and strengths they possess that could further support their personalized learning.

Evaluation of school efficacy is often completed through the verification of various criteria that have been identified on a one dimensional plain. Public education systems have several student support service systems in place for students. Response to Intervention (RtI) models, such as the pyramid of interventions and positive behaviour intervention supports (PBIS), which address both academic and behavioural aspects of learning are invaluable and exist to serve all students as a means of meeting their various needs. Despite these models being embedded in practice, there are still many students who are not thriving within their school environments. In much the same way as Keyes' work in Mental Health supports the existence of a two-dimensional model, I propose that the field of inclusionary education exists on a similar dual-dimensional plain, supporting an environment conducive to flourishing. Through my doctoral research, I investigated this environmental dimension, identifying elements which are consistently present across various inclusive educational contexts, providing students with the support necessary to flourish.

Every school community, like the students who learn within them, are different, and for this reason schools may be situated in various places along the continuum of student service practices and procedures. While schools may have strong student support services in place, many students may still be languishing. Many studies have demonstrated the importance of nurturing an ideal learning environment which is a

crucial element of education that is often overlooked. The school environment and culture must be one which is designed to nurture the various needs of all students, allowing them to learn and flourish. There is evidence in New Brunswick of educational communities which have created an atmosphere of inclusion, acceptance and produce staff and students who are flourishing throughout their educational journeys. What do students require in order to flourish? From this two-dimensional paradigm both aspects of education have been examined, allowing school communities as well as individual educators to reflect on current practice and place themselves within this two-dimensional grid. Addressing areas of need is part of a strength-based assessment, facilitating change along the way.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included a review of current literature as it relates to the adoption and evolution of inclusionary education as well as a detailed exploration of strength-based practices in education through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. The rationale for promoting a dual-dimensional approach within the context of inclusionary education through the use of strength-based practices was explored, as was the need for a shift in the role of educators throughout the process. To this end, this chapter addressed multiple relevant theories, research designs and methods that align with the values of a strength-based paradigm, consistent to the focus of this research endeavour.

Chapter Two: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

This section provides a concise review of key theoretical models underlying the focus of my investigation. This is followed by a detailed presentation of my research design, Appreciative Inquiry, as well as a rational for the application of this design. At the close of this section, I present my research questions and how they guided the various phases of my research methods over the course of a 12-month period.

Research Overview

The intent of this research endeavour was to investigate the application of strength-based practices that are currently in place within inclusionary classroom and school settings throughout New Brunswick. These practices were viewed through the lens of a dual-dimensional approach, identifying not only the support-oriented dimension, but also the strength-based dimension of inclusionary education which provides the necessary conditions required for students to flourish in all areas of learning. This study drew on the perspectives of educators and departmental visionaries within the province of New Brunswick whose had experience not only with the support-oriented practices of inclusionary education but also in the application and amplification of strength-based practices at all levels of public education. Action research designs and methods which typically have a problem-based approach were reframed through a Positive Psychology lens to draw out strengths, promising practices, dreams, and potential innovations in the roles of educators and operational structures for the promotion of student flourishing within the context of inclusionary education.

Theoretical Framework Supporting a Dual-Dimensional Model of Inclusion

The area of inclusionary education has been the subject of research for the past several decades. It has only been in recent years, however, that inclusion has been examined through a more strength-based lens. Much of this perspective comes from the theoretical underpinnings of Positive Psychology, which has gained recognition in academic literature and discourse due largely to the ongoing research efforts of Seligman (1999). Seligman, viewed as the father of Positive Psychology, asserts that individual experiences including well-being, contentment, and satisfaction; hope and optimism; and happiness contribute to a *good life.* Acknowledging that education is a social act, Positive Psychology at the group level focuses on elements of civic virtues and the collective movement towards citizenship, responsibility, tolerance, and work ethic (Rana, 2015). It is important to note that the aim of Positive Psychology is not to deny the challenging events of life nor their significance with respect to individual development, coping and creativity (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Rana, 2015). Rather, Positive Psychology attempts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience that takes into consideration both positive and negative aspects. Strength-based approaches that come from the theoretical perspective of Positive Psychology provide educational communities with frameworks necessary to nurture learners and shape their holistic development, helping them to flourish and allowing them to move towards their full potential (Rana, 2015). Flourishing, as defined by Keyes (2002), refers to the experience of "life going well" and is often equated with a high level of wellbeing (Keyes, 2002).

Traditionally, mental health has been conceptualized as existing on a single continuum pathway consisting of an axis with the presence of mental illness at one end and the absence of mental illness at the other. Mental health or well-being (positive

mental health), then, has been viewed traditionally as the absence of mental illness. Within this model, mental illness and positive mental health are mutually exclusive. Keyes' research within the field of mental health presented the concept of a dual-dimensional approach to understanding varied facets of well-being (mental illness; flourishing).

Research surrounding positive mental health and the continuum of flourishing and languishing has been divided between two principal areas of thought: hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Hedonic well-being research focuses on feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and interest in life. Keyes termed this to be emotional well-being. Eudaimonic well-being research, on the other hand, focuses on the realization of one's full potential, optimal levels of functioning, and meaningful engagement in daily activities. Keyes termed this as psychological well-being (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). To this end, in terms of its validity within the context of inclusionary education, there is cause to propose the existence of a similar dual-dimensional approach.

Within the context of the New Brunswick education system, inclusion has been implemented and accepted at all levels of public sector education. The successes seen have been largely due to the support services models that have been designed to meet the varying needs of all learners. Response to Intervention (RtI) programs such as the Pyramid of Interventions and Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (PBIS) are examples of widely accepted and utilized elements of this support services dimension. When appropriating a dual-dimensional model to inclusionary education similar to that conceptualized by Keyes (2002) within the field of mental health, a second dimension consisting of varying environmental conditions may also exist. This dimension, along

with that of support services, works together to contribute to student flourishing. Flourishing, then, can be understood to be a combination of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being; in other words, "feeling good and doing good" (Frederickson, 2013).

Two theoretical models often linked with the concept of flourishing as proposed by Keyes (2002), is Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1999) and PERMAH (Norrish, 2013; Pascha, 2019). Deci and Ryan's SDT describes the relationship of three key psychological wellbeing needs that are foundational to people's well-being and that set the necessary conditions for flourishing in their social relationships or settings. These three wellbeing needs are: relatedness, competence, and autonomy support (Deci & Ryan, 1999). Relatedness refers to a sense of belonging and feeling connected to others based on supportive relationships that occur within social organizational contexts. Competence describes feelings of accomplishment and self-worth that exist when people feel recognized for their gifts, abilities, strengths, and achievements. Autonomy support refers to having a sense of control and support over decision-making processes reflected in interactions with others that provide space for voice, choice, and collaboration. SDT defines these needs as universal and essential for optimal human development and flourishing (Morrison & Peterson, 2015).

According to Noble & McGrath (2015), Positive Education is a relatively new direction within the field of Positive Psychology with its research being applied specifically to educational contexts. It integrates the core principles of Positive Psychology with the educational structures, practices and programs that enhance both wellbeing and academic achievement within the context of learning environments. The

aim of Positive Education is to enable all members of a school community to succeed and flourish both in terms of wellbeing and learning.

The Positive Education framework combines educational principles with the insights from happiness and well-being research undertaken by Seligman. Based on his PERMAH model, he delineated six core elements of well-being that educators can incorporate within schools to facilitate students' positive development and flourishing, both academically and personally. He contends that all six elements are critical for enhancing learning environments and are all contributing factors to Positive Education. These elements form the acronym PERMAH: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).

• *Positive emotion*

Positive emotions reflect the capacity to be optimistic and to foster a positive view of self, others, the past, the present and future. Fostering positive emotions often involves reframing circumstances and experiences from a more constructive and healthier outlook.

• *Engagement*

Engagement is often used to describe the experience of "flow." Flow or engagement occurs when individuals are immersed in activities that are captivating, that elicit enjoyment, and that draw on strong connections with areas of personal interest and sources of intrinsic motivation.

• *Relationships*

People flourish when they have positive connections and a sense of relatedness or belonging with others. Positive relationships may include parents, siblings, peers, coworkers, and friends. Positive and sustained relationships provide a source of support

during difficult times and foster people's ability to be resilient and gain confidence in undertaking new challenges.

• *Meaning*

Meaning refers to understanding the value of one's contribution for a greater purpose or reason. People gain meaning when they understand the impact of their effort and decisions in life. Meaning contributes to peoples' personal convictions and their move towards a person's sense of fulfillment or satisfaction.

•*Accomplishment*

Accomplishment reflects the process of setting and achieving personal goals. A sense of competence and self-efficacy emerges out of realized accomplishments, setting the stage for new plans for learning, growth, and development (Pascha, 2019, Seligman, 2011).

• *Health*

Health refers to both physical and psychological wellbeing. Embedding healthy living habits such as eating well, getting enough sleep, and engaging in physical exercise are examples of ways in which physical health can be fostered. The education and practice of competencies such as resiliency lends to better psychological health (Norrish, 2013).

Within both SDT and PERMAH, the similar concepts of Engagement (PERMAH) (Norrish, 2013; Pascha, 2019, Seligman, 2011) or psychological need for Autonomy Support (SDT) (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) are highlighted as foundational conditions to support student wellbeing and flourishing. While the short-term benefits of student engagement or autonomy support in learning can serve as a predictor of academic outcomes, longer term impacts of these constructs have been associated with enhanced attendance, resiliency, and school completion (Jimerson et al., 2003).

Fredricks et al. (2004) and Noble & McGrath (2015) delineate a range of positive impacts linked to student engagement or autonomy support:

- When students are *engaged or their autonomy is supported behaviourally,* they are attentive and actively involved in each step throughout their learning process.
- When they are *engaged or their autonomy is supported emotionally in* a learning activity, they are interested, curious, enthusiastic, excited, confident, and satisfied with the results of their efforts.
- When students are *engaged or their autonomy is supported cognitively,* they are intellectually challenged through the use of both critical and creative thinking skills.
- When students are *engaged or their autonomy is supported socially,* they are observed to be communicating effectively with their peers, cooperating, and collaborating with their partners or members of their team and using social skills such as turn taking and active listening.

Qualitative Research Designs

Qualitative research may be defined as the "systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings" (Teherani et al., 2015, p. 669). Such phenomena may be comprised of the ways in which people experience varied aspects of their daily lives, or how participants within groups or organizations interact with one another and shape the nature of their relationships. Within qualitative research, the investigator is regarded as the central data collection instrument. It is the role of the investigators to explore the reasons events take place, what happens, and what those events mean to the people experiencing them (Hays & Wood, 2011; Teherani et al., 2015).

Qualitative researchers base their research assumptions on a post-positivist, critical or constructivist perspective. Post-positivist researchers assert that contextual and individual differences such as learning culture or the learner themselves influence how participants perceive and understand the world, and that these differences represent a critical aspect of investigating specific areas of inquiry. The critical perspective is emancipatory in nature as it aims to uncover the effects of underlying political and systemic structures (Griffiths, 2009). Constructivist researchers place emphasis on the belief that there is “no single reality, and the researcher elicits participants’ view of reality” (Teherani et al., 2015, p. 669).

In their discussion of qualitative research, Teherani et al. (2015) identify three major qualitative designs that may be applied inclusive of Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, and Ethnography. Grounded Theory aims to describe and explain a particular phenomenon such as the sequences, processes, and conditions under which they occur (Hays & Wood, 2011). The outcome of such research is the development of a new theoretical model (Teherani et al., 2015). Phenomenology aims “to describe the essence of a phenomenon” (p. 670) through the exploration of individuals’ lived experiences. Dissemination of findings from phenomenological qualitative studies contribute to society’s understanding of the targeted phenomenon within a particular context. Ethnography, Hays & Wood (2011) noted, is cited to be qualitative inquiry’s earliest recognized tradition. It is used to examine social, behavioural, and linguistic norms and patterns of a particular cultural group. It is from the ethnographic tradition that studies using the term *a day in the life of…*. Beyond the preceding categories of

qualitative research design, Hays and Wood (2011) add yet another methodological approach, Action Research.

Action Research

Action Research (AR) was originally developed by Lewin (1948) as a means for problem-solving areas of challenge or concern within social and organizational settings. In the educational and social science fields, Action Research is initiated by exploring problems in a general systematic way by:

- Formulating key questions;
- Planning and designing investigations;
- Gathering, processing and analyzing data;
- Interpreting the data and drawing conclusions; and
- Providing responses to relevant key questions.

(Boyd & Bright, 2007; Rauch et al., 2019)

Over the past several decades challenges experienced within education settings and the teaching profession have contributed to the need for research approaches that provide practice-based evidence, as well as opportunities for ongoing professional development for educators. Action Research has become recognized as an approach that encourages practitioners in education to become involved in applied research efforts that addresses relevant questions or challenges in their own profession or educational contexts. Beginning in the United Stated where Action Research was conceived, it was later applied in Europe and Australia, gaining international prominence as a research approach strongly linked with personal and professional learning (Rauch et al., 2019).

Building on the work of Lewin, Ponte emphasized the importance of educators taking the time to reflect on their practices and to continuously evaluate the changes being undertaken in their classrooms, as well as the impact those changes have made. Ponte theorized that AR was less about educational reform and more about providing professional development opportunities for empowering educators to directly apply AR methods in their own individual classrooms (Ponte, 2005). Johnson (2012) notes that AR is a systematic method used by educators to observe their practice or explore a particular problem existing in the field in order to develop a course of action to resolve it. Sanderse (2016) explained that AR was appealing for the field of education because its practical design allowed for educators to observe and modify their own practices while directly applying their findings to this end.

Rauch et al. (2019) delineate four guiding principles for the application of AR within the field of practical education.

- AR pursues worthwhile practical purposes to find solutions for problems.
- AR is collaborative and participatory by involving key stakeholders in the research process.
- AR is responsive and developmental, taking into consideration varying perspectives from key stakeholders.
- AR connects theory and practice through the balanced practice of both action and reflection.

(Rauch et al., 2019)

In terms of connecting theory to practice, Rauch et al. (2019) identify constructivism and systems theory as the two main theoretical contributors.

Constructivism, as previously explained, posits that individuals' realities differ based on participants' personal perspectives, which are constructed through lived experiences. Constructivism in education, then, is a process whereby individuals build their knowledge based on their prior experiences and understandings (Teherani et al., 2015). Systems theory uses reflections as the principal strategy for gathering data relating to the investigation of systems and the exploration of complex issues or problems (Rauch et al., 2019). Within social settings such as those in education, questions posed to elicit specific information regarding an organization can serve to illuminate the connectedness and interdependency of various systems and how these relationships and our actions can impact our reality and those of others. how different systems are interconnected. Flood (2000) asserts that "to appreciate 'human systems' in action research …requires learning and understanding about emergent systems of meaning … that emerge when they interplay through human interaction" (p.6).

Guided by these two theoretical positions, AR fits well within the research of practicing teachers as it provides them with the ability to reflect on their instructional practices, or other focused areas of interest. After reflection educators are able to plan and then act. Hassen (2016) asserts that AR can be defined as a way of thinking and systematically assessing what is happening within any given classroom, implementing action to improve learning, and monitoring and evaluating this change, and determining throughout if it was a successful and positive change.

Participatory Action Research

Delving one step deeper into the action research design is the model of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Similar to the design from which is it derived,

PAR identifies a certain problem within the field and aims to solve it through the use and application of applied approaches. The difference between the traditional AR model and PAR is that PAR relies heavily on the participation and dialogue among professionals and other individuals directly involved in groups or organizations in order to develop solutions that can be actively applied to real-life problems. Lake and Wendland (2018) defined PAR as the participatory process of gathering knowledge for the purpose of using and sharing such knowledge with the intention of effecting change. It is this collaborative and democratic approach that differentiates it from the original AR method. At its constructivist core PAR affirms that people, particularly within the field of education, are social beings. The democratic theory behind PAR allows for all stakeholders to participate equally, in a non-hierarchical form in the pursuit of change, common goals and collaboration. For this reason, many researchers and educators select PAR for its community engagement, collaborative, and participatory qualities. PAR can also be identified by its focus on solely human and social interest areas of study.

The intent of Participatory Action Research is to contribute to positive change within communities, organizations, or groups. As Hall et al. (2017) notes: “It is a process in which you bring together communities affected by a certain situation or problem to figure out what is going on as a group and do something about it.” (p. 6).

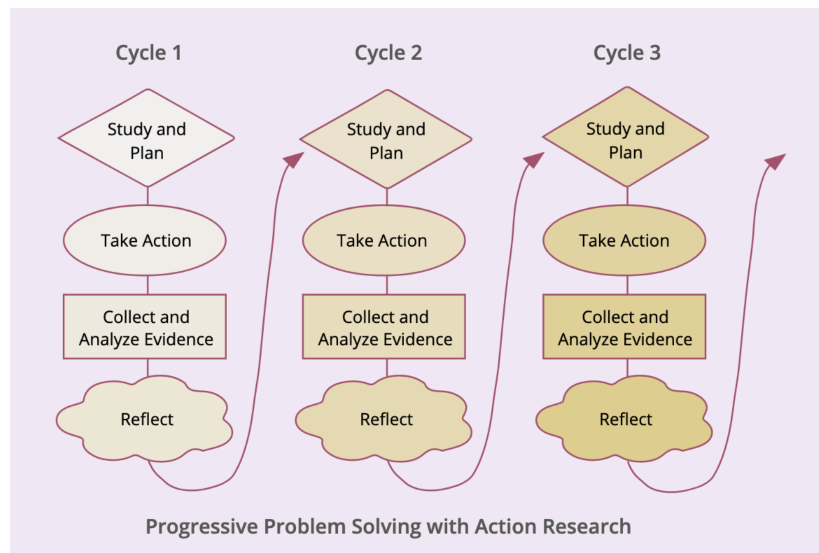
Within this process *research* and *action* are part of an interwoven approach, that feed each other through an iterative cycle of reflection. A beneficial way of understanding the dynamic between research and action is to consider the concept of Multiple Loop Learning. Multiple loop learning may be defined as the process by which:

"methods and types of actions develop over time through an iterative process of research, action and reflection" (Hall et al., 2017, p. 5).

Figure 9 below illustrates the continuous or repeating cycles of studying, taking action, collecting, and analyzing evidence, and reflecting. The repeating of this cycle contributes to progressive problem solving as a result of the participatory action process. Hall et al. label this as virtuous circles, referring to the process of mutual empowerment that takes place as a result of the application of Participatory Action Research methods.

Figure 9

Multiple Loop Learning



Hall et al., 2017

Taveras (2016) notes that the main differences between traditional AR and PAR designs are the aspects of collaborative involvement, dialogue, analysis, and willingness for change among participants. Freire (2018) asserted that critical thinking can only be fostered through the process of mutual communication and collaborative dialogue.

Problems vs Strengths

As previously discussed, Action Research and Participatory Action Research begin with the identification of a problem as the basis for moving toward positive change (Randolph, 2006). Such research applications seek to create change within the system by first identifying, analyzing problematic areas, and finally developing a plan to effect change related to the aforementioned problems. Boyd and Bright (2007) noted that beginning with solely a problem-focused orientation may also include the inherent challenge of empowering participants or engaging those situated in the area of study or investigation. This challenge arises out of the underlying presumption and associated emotions that emerge among participants signaling that there is a problem with people that needs to be changed.

In contrast to problem-oriented perspectives, contemporary developments in Participatory Action Research methods have also embraced paradigms related to "discovering and leveraging the positive core" of organizations and people (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Vianello, 2019, p. 164). Appreciative Inquiry, sometimes referred to as Positive Action Research, differentiates itself from other research approaches in terms of the strength-focused process by which it initiates and engages participants in action research methods. Such processes involve placing emphasis on an approach to comprehensive inquiry that involves dialogue, exploration, and analysis of strengths, successes, accomplishments, aspirations, and potential for moving through and working through proposed areas of challenge or concern. Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Vianello (2019) describe Appreciative Inquiry as an inclusive, relational model of Positive Action Research, rooted in social construction theory that engages the positive core values and

strengths of people, groups and organizations in the investigation of areas of challenges and directions for change.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is still relatively a new model of Participatory Action Research. Cooperrider, along with his co-author Srivastva (1987), developed the AI model. AI was first acknowledged in the world of academia in 1985 when Cooperrider defended his own doctoral dissertation. In his dissertation Cooperrider delineated the specific methodology necessary for understanding and implementing an AI approach to research as well as its potential impact in advancing social innovation. His dissertation received a great deal of attention and led to a very prominent career as his work evolved to examine the various facets in which AI could be utilized and improved upon. AI, the research design that is at the basis of all of Cooperrider's research and subsequent publications, is a form of PAR which can be directly applied within various fields and contexts.

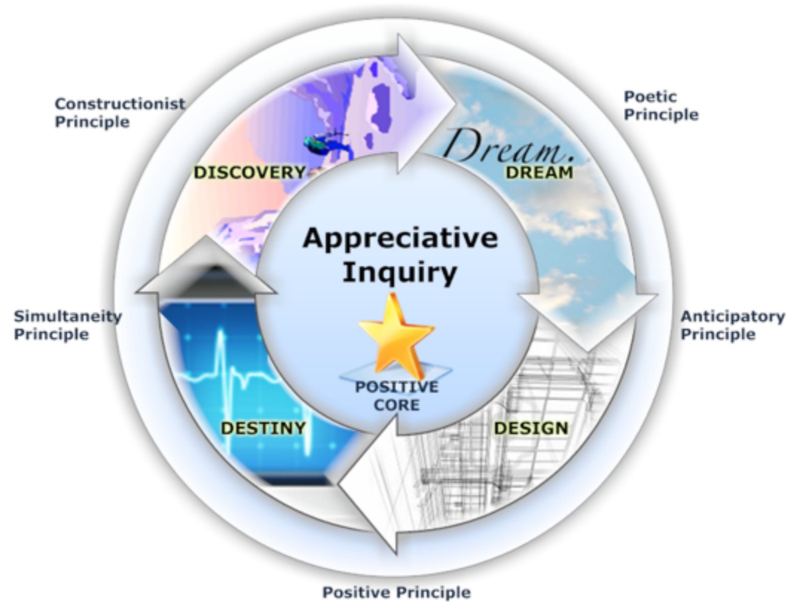
Among the various articles having been published on the subject of AI, there were two that addressed the meaning of both terms in an attempt to define the research design itself. Troxel (2002) defined *appreciation* in various terms: to feel or express gratitude, to hold a favorable opinion and to have a full understanding of meaning and importance. It is the exploration of what has enabled an organization to exist and thrive rather than look for problems or weaknesses. Doveston and Keenaghan (2006) defined *inquiry* as a quest for change and intervention. These two combined perspectives offer a starting point in viewing the research design of AI.

Theoretical Underpinnings of AI

AI, as most with most qualitative research method designs including AR, stems from several well-known and long living theoretical perspectives. Principles of AI can be found in the theories of social constructionism, simultaneity, poetic principle, anticipatory principle, and positive thinking principle (Breslow et al., 2015; He, 2013; Kozik, 2018). Guba and Lincoln (1994) as well as Lehaye and Espe (2010) in their respective dissertations explored the use of the AI design explored the theoretical roots of AI in great depth.

Figure 10

AI Theoretical Perspectives



Kaminski, 2012

- *Constructionist principle (Words create worlds):*

  Reality and identity are socially created through language and conversations with others.

- *Poetic principle* (We can choose what we study):

  Life experience is rich. What we choose to study describes, develops, and creates

the world as we know it.

- *Anticipatory principle* (Image inspires action):

  Individuals and organizations naturally move in the direction of their vision of the future. If these future visions are positive and hopeful so too will be the present-day actions.

- *Positive principle* (Positive questions lead to positive change):

  Potential for change requires positive interaction and collaboration. This change is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core.

- *Simultaneity principle* (Inquiry creates change):

  We live in a world created by our questions. The act of affecting change begins the moment we begin to ask questions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Kemp, 2005, p. 2).

The majority of the AI research design comes from the social constructionist theory. This is a body of thought and beliefs that first emerged from academics doing work in the areas of social sciences. The basic premise of social constructionism is that humanity is a common thread that joins communities together through the belief that we build the world that we live in together and that language is the main vehicle for the transfer of knowledge. This shared knowledge is facilitated through engaging in dialogue as a form of social interactions and building of relationships (Lehaye & Espe, 2010).

Fynn (2013) asserted that AI is "social construction in action" and when its practices are in place, they become deeply embedded within a particular culture. Within education ways of teaching, planning and collective thinking are often repeated and may become adopted methods for how things are done. Lehaye and Espe (2010) argued that

traditional education prepares students to become adults who fit only in the world that exists right now rather than the world of tomorrow whose demands and needs are unknown and ever changing. The social constructionist model for education, such as the one lobbied for by Freire, called for more dialogue between educators and students allowing students to become self-motivated learners driven by inquiry and the desire to problem-solve world issues as they see them.

AI Principles

As mentioned above, there is one very definite difference between PAR and AI. With PAR there is the preceding assumption that there is an existing problem that needs to be solved. AI, on the other hand, holds a more strength-based approach that focuses on the positive elements already in place within an organization and gives value to the transformative feature of strengths. In this way Calabrese (2006) stated that the strength-based focus of AI is human in its very nature and ensures that the action found throughout the research process is applicable within the context in which it was studied.

At the very heart of Cooperrider's design of AI is a reverence for life that draws the researcher to inquire beyond what is being outwardly presented and encourages the exploration of deeper levels. AI is drawn to identify factors and forces involved in a particular organization (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Cooperrider coined the term *pygmalion dynamic* in 1990 when describing AI, particularly when framed in the context of positive questioning during the descriptive stage, to be looking for the best in others. Valuing each individual participant by seeking their input and expertise within their field is the first step in engaging active and authentic participants within an AR project (Cooperrider, 1990). It is through this design approach to research that researchers are

able to help educators blossom to their fullest potential and to see themselves and their colleagues as integral members of the institutional frameworks within the system in which they work. Through this approach and following the common vision established by the school community as a whole, educators can align themselves with the most current and effective strategies, policies, and agendas (Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2014) in terms of inclusive education.

The research design of AI is one where collaboration is crucial to success. AI often serves as a change agent within an organization or systematic structure itself. AI is also used in research focused on a shared desire to improve practice or process by investigating that which is already working. Throughout the four phases, particularly during discussions set out to discover, dream and design, Calabrese et al. (2010) noted the importance of improved communication and cooperation among educators and staff within a school. It is vital that the school community share a common vision of a desired future which can then only be achieved through collaboration. It can be very difficult to establish a collaborative educational community within a school that has not previously practiced open dialogue and frequent communication. Within the field of education, educators take their teaching practices, pedagogy, and classroom management very seriously. All of this, in many respects, is a reflection of themselves. It can often be difficult for educators to *let go* of the control and collaborate with their school community to achieve the collegial common vision for the learners of the school (Breslow et al., 2015). Collaboration begins from the development of mutual respect.

Having a common goal is the only way to affect consistent and sustainable change within a classroom environment. Beyond the mutual respect, communication and

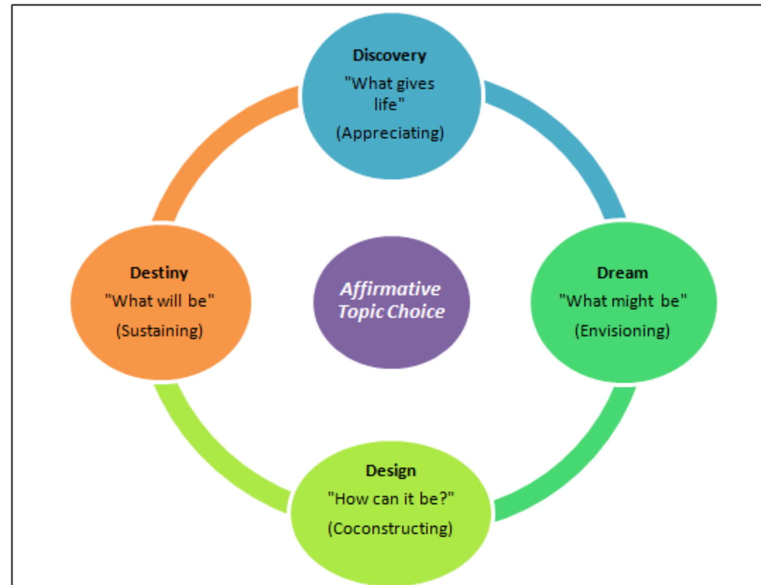
collaboration among a staff, AI holds as a principle that individuals must also be able to remain open-minded, flexible, and capable of progressive thinking (Calabrese et al., 2010). The colloquial *paradigm shift* that so many professionals attempt to attain does not happen overnight. Through continuous open dialogue and progression through the describe, dream and design stages of AI, however, educators can begin to see the impact these changes in practice can have on the students they are teaching. Kozik (2018) challenged that while AI does not focus on solving a problem, the progression through the phases of the AI design does allow for educators' minds to be open to problem-solving techniques and practices. Developing an academic community within a school based on shared respect, communication and collaboration is what begins to generate a true paradigm shift (Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2014). Participants of a particular AI case study completed by Calabrese et al. (2010), identified their affirmative topic to be "creating a positive culture to allow students to succeed academically and socially and aspire to great things" (p. 257).

AI Cycle

The AI research design is a theoretical framework to facilitate positive change within an organization and inform practice through research throughout the various phases of the AI design. It is important to note that the lens through which AI is filtered is one of social capital according to Calabrese (2006). The AI model, as proposed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), initially consisted of four phases which contributed to positive collaboration with a shift to sustainable change.

Figure 11

AI Research Phases



Cooperrider et al., 2008

The first phase of the AI design is the Discovery Phase. Shuyab (2014) referred to this stage as the time for exploring needs and experiences. It is here that the researcher can learn through surveys, interviews, and smaller focus groups the positive aspects of the particular organization studies. Cooperrider sought to find the element that breathed life into an organization, focusing on and sharing the positive elements of practice (Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2014). Essentially, the Discovery Phase describes the aspects that are currently being implemented and are working well within a system. Shuyab (2014) noted that the Discovery Phase is the observation of *what is* within an organization. Cooperrider, in his most recent unpublished work, emphasized the importance of not only discovering but valuing these life-giving factors. Providing value "dislodges the certainty of deficit constructions" and allows positive action to occur moving forward (Cooperrider, n.d.).

Following Discovery is the Dream Phase. In Shuyab's writing (2014), this second phase is referred as the stage of sharing and validation of both group and individual results from interviews and questionnaires. This phase permits staff the freedom and courage to envision a better version of what is already working. It is through this process, that new ways of seeing and understanding the world begin to emerge. The Dream Phase allows individuals and teams to see *what could be* were the current practices refined to be the best that they could be without financial or systemic restraints. Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2014) phrases it as a team asking: *"What would our perfect life-giving organization look like? How would we look if we were inclusive in all we do?"* The Dream Phase not only provides educators with permission to dream but also facilitates new and positive alternative practices for the organization.

The third stage of the AI research model is the Design Phase. It is here that staff, with the support of the research team, collaboratively decide which elements of their organization's success they wish to focus on in order to design a plan to implement these positive changes. In the ideal world there would be several areas of a school, in the case of the field of education, that are working well. To affect true change, it is suggested to focus on one attainable goal at a time. Cooperrider suggests that this stage requires individual conversations to grow and evolve into group discussions. Likewise, individual visions should become a shared community vision (Cooperrider, n.d.). Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2014) outlined the Design Phase to be a time where the learning organization and community share what they think things should be. Examples of questions that could be asked during this phase of the AI cycle would be *"What will be our guiding principles? How could we be inclusive all of the time?"*. The positive and strength-based framing of

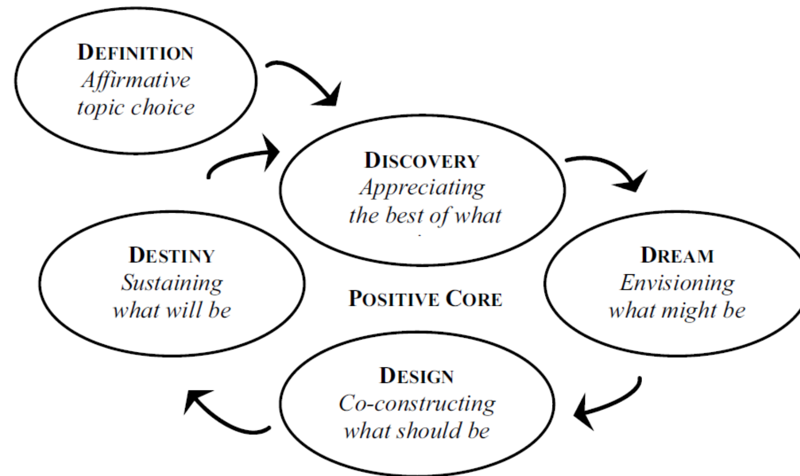
these questions leads to excitement and a sense of authorship of the designed plan of action. This sense of self-actualization leads to productive buy-in from all stakeholders.

The final original stage is known as the Destiny Phase. It is here where the organization's team determines to implement the plan for change that was previously developed during the Design Phase. This is often the most difficult and rarely achieved stage of the AI model for reasons that will later be discussed in more detail. Individuals and organizations are naturally designed to change, but to affect change there needs to be a great amount of commitment, communication, and continued collaboration from all stakeholders. When considering AI carried out within the frame of the educational system, schools and educators are often held to a particular district or departmental system that poses various limitations and constraints to desired change in practice. Thus, the Destiny Phase aims to highlight the shared commitment to change. Positively framed questions such as *"What are our first steps towards this future?"* and *"What can I do now to help us move forward inclusively?"* are two examples brought to light by Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2014). Cooperrider's original intent describes the Destiny Phase as the moment where a team or organization moves towards the construction of a new and brighter future through innovation and action (Ludema et al., 2001).

A fifth phase model of the Appreciative Inquiry design has since been developed. The Affirmative topic choice is argued to be the first and most important phase of the AI process as it leads the way for all future discussion and collaboration. Cooperrider himself described Topic Choice to be the newly added first step in Appreciative Inquiry as it is based on the premise that organizations move in the direction of what they study or what they strive to achieve (Ludema et al., 2001).

Figure 12

AI 5D Model



Cooperrider et al. (2003)

Positive Questioning

It has been established throughout the examination of the AI design that it is strength-based at its center. Part of achieving this strength-based element is in the use of positive questioning throughout the descriptive stage of the AI cycle. Positive questioning allows participants to reflect on the more positive aspects of their practices, working environment, professional relationships, and contributions to all of the above. Quite often researchers will begin by asking participants standard questions such as: *"Think of a time when you were most excited or engaged. What were the factors surrounding these events?"* (Giles & Alderson, 2008). The questions can also be of a more personal nature, exploring what individuals value about themselves, their practices, and their workplace itself. In exploring these personal reflections further questions related specifically to the field of education can be asked. *"What are your school's best practices? What is the core value that gives your school life?"* (Cooperrider, n.d.; Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2014). Once

these factors have been identified, it is important for researchers to explore how individuals perceive their impact on these factors (Calabrese et al., 2010).

Fynn (2013) argued that rather than positive questioning, generative questioning should be used to reframe the thinking of individuals and open them to further reflection about their practices and school environment. These questions should bring about thoughts of novelty, whole-hearted engagement, building relationships and reframing reality within the schools and classrooms. For successful generative questions to be developed at the outset of the AI research process, it is essential for the researcher to have a solid understanding of the current issues being faced by the organization and its participants (Busche, 2013).

Regardless of the method of questioning used to prompt reflection and dialogue when exploring teaching practices and school implementation of inclusive learning, it is crucial that individual educators examine their beliefs about what it means to be fully inclusive across all aspects of diversity (Erwin et al., 2012). Further affirming questions can be asked to explore inclusive strengths within a school or individual classroom. Asking an educator what inclusive strategies they have already tried or what they like about being a member of that educational environment can provide further insight to the school's core values. This would naturally lead staff to collaboratively explore *"What do you want your school's future to be?"* (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006). From here data can be analyzed and responses grouped into important and common themes from which to work (Kozik, 2018). Once this question is asked and collaborative dialogue is established, staff within a school can explore a global understanding and shared

definition of how they themselves define inclusion. This would be the first step in designing an inclusive framework to work from, improving inclusive practices.

Benefits and Challenges of AI

Shuayb et al. (2009) recognize that while AI is well-known as a method for the promotion of organizational change, this was not its original intent. Bushe (2012) clarifies that AI did not begin as an organizational change agent but rather as a research method for making theory more generative (Bushe, 2012). Gergen (1978) defines generative capacity in terms of its ability:

> to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and hereby furnish new alternatives for social actions (Gergen, 1978, p. 1346).

In recent years, AI has increasingly been used as a research tool within the field of education. The AI design is a strength-focused approach to research that reinforces an emphasis on positivity, the amplification of people's potential, and the importance of collaboration and engagement. Bellinger and Elliott (2011) note that "AI is grounded in relationship, context, and a determination to collaborate for mutual benefit." (Bellinger & Elliott, 2011, p.721). Over the past several decades, the application of AI has increased within the educational arena with a focus on student learning, instructional practices, and system-wide approaches (Shuayb et al., 2009).

Researchers acknowledge AI to be an effective research design allowing for an overall better understanding of life-giving elements of a structure's day-to-day operations (Shuayb et al., 2009). A striking strength held by the AI design is that of hope. Calabrese

et al. (2010) reported within their study of AI in rural schools that acknowledgement of respect for and valuing of individual participants' strengths and assets were evident throughout the sharing of their mutual experiences. From this they uncovered the underlying component of hope which was present throughout the AI process.

Setting common goals (Shuayb et al., 2009) for the future, collaboratively developing a systematic plan to achieve those goals, and believing that individuals as well as the educational community have the capacity to achieve those goals all require a degree of hopefulness and optimism (Calabrese et al., 2010). Bushe identifies AI's ability to "quickly create good feelings amongst people" (Bushe, 2012, p. 6). Participants frequently report feelings of positivity and of having contributed meaningfully to the discussions and research initiatives (Shuayb et al., 2009). Giles and Alderson (2008) agreed with these findings in stating that AI restored hopeful dialogue into a previously deficit-based conversation.

The importance of participant engagement and participation is underscored in the AI model. In the educational context this entails actively involving key stakeholders in sharing their first-hand experiences, which in turn provide insights highlighting the positive aspects of an organization's life-giving practices. This act of giving voice to participants can prove to be empowering and emancipatory (Shuayb et al., 2009). Erwin et al. (2012) assert that "people who are the object of research are experts about their lives and are best able to identify key issues and resolutions that lead to meaningful action" (Erwin et al., p. 2).

Findings from studies using the AI design can be easily applied to various organizations and cultures. This is particularly true of AI research being done in the field

of inclusive education. Within highly complex systems or structures, Rogers and Fraser noted that AI is particularly useful in reframing these experiences to better identify practices that are “valuable, useful and important” (Rogers & Fraser, 2003, p. 80). Shuayb et al. (2009) contend that one of AI’s feature strengths is its ability to identify good practices within a system or structure (Shuayb et al., 2009). Furthermore, He (2013) indicated the presence of the reflective element of AI that is often lacking in more traditional forms of qualitative action research. It is important to provide both researcher and participants the opportunity to reflect on the promising practices that have been identified and how their application can promote possible change or improvement within an organization. It is the welcome use of feedback (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006) that invites professional reflection on practices.

Many of the challenges discussed in this section reflect critiques related to AI’s focus on the use of strength-based approaches both in research and education. Educational areas of inquiry, methods and research often place emphasis on describing or resolving areas of challenge, problems, or deficit-related issues. Some researchers have challenged this frequent focus on deficit-oriented applications by moving towards research designs that consider *what could be* in contrast to an evaluation of solely what has not been effective or not worked well in the past (Bushe, 2012).

One of the main critiques of AI is how positive its focus is. Breslow et al. (2015) highlight that, due to its focus on positivity, AI may not confront problems seriously (Breslow et al., 2015). Rogers and Fraser (2003) also note that AI allows for a potential distortion of findings by covering over substantive problems in focusing solely on the positive aspects of a system or organization. It could be argued that this is a valid point,

though not a true challenge. It has already been clearly stated through various reviews of AI, and by its creator himself, that AI is a strength-based model that does not seek to solve a problem but rather enhance that which is already working. Problems occurring within an organization will still inevitably arise through discussions that take place during the Discovery phase. Through the use of the AI research design, however, these problems may be reframed and viewed differently from a strength-based perspective, and therefore be approached differently. Bushe (2012) continues this vein of thought by cautioning that *negatively* discussing the problems of a system or organization will then frame subsequent discussions and problem-solving through this same negative lens. In contrast, incorporating a more appreciative focus has the potential to generate more positive outcomes.

As was found in the previous case studies, one significant challenge of the use of AI within the education field are the various limitations that the system itself imposes. Fynn (2013) noted that educators often have a reduced amount of time to commit to isolated participation in a research study due to classroom and administrative responsibilities. Limitations imposed by the school district restricted the amount of time researchers could spend within the schools and the amount of progress that could be made following the four identified stages of AI. Aside from administrators, the increased workload and expectations placed on educators in recent years results in many constraints on their willingness to engage wholly in a current research project. This involves the time they would have available to participate in meaningful dialogue as well as their flexibility both during and outside of instructional hours. Facilitated through the four phases of the AI cycle, educational philosophies and paradigms will ultimately shift through

participation in these types of research efforts. Rather than *adding* to the workload of educators, designs for change within the organizational structure of the education system can alter the way educators operate.

Rogers and Fraser (2003) note that the use of the AI design requires the development a deep understanding of the program, system or organization that is being studied. For this to be achieved, the researcher must participate in extended engagement and collaboration while investigating the various perspectives that exist within the organization being studied.

Appropriating AI Research in Inclusion

As a practicing elementary school teacher with specialized training in both French as a Second Language as well as the education of Exceptional Learners, I am on the frontline in terms of recognizing the change that is necessary within our current education system. Since the signing of the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, inclusion has been a core theoretical practice globally as well as more locally in Canada where I practice as a professional educator. More recently, Porter and Aucoin (2012) completed a review of inclusive education within the Province of New Brunswick, resulting in a report which provided several detailed recommendations for how inclusion could be better implemented within the province of New Brunswick.

Currently education, particularly when examining students deemed to be exceptional and/or hard to serve learners, is working from a deficit-based and support-oriented model. Struggling students are known for the areas in which they are struggling, and interventions are planned accordingly following the various school or district designed supports fitting within the Response to Intervention model, such as the pyramid

of interventions. Inclusion is often seen as being implemented through physical space alone. There is a continued need for inclusionary practices to follow a more strength-based and student-centered approach to serve more students.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is philosophically consistent with strength-based approaches within inclusionary education. When the study of inclusionary education is accompanied by a focus on strengths and assets, there is an inevitable shift in paradigm that leads to the reframing of questions and changing in perspectives (Morrison & Peterson, 2015). The positive questioning approach used in AI is appropriate in facilitating this change or shift. AI is an efficient and effective approach for studying as well as facilitating necessary change within a variety of social systems, groups, or communities' contexts (Bushe, 2013; Quinney & Richardson, 2014). AI integrates philosophy, theory, practice, and research in an intentional effort to reduce traditional gaps between these areas (Cooperrider, 2012). In addition, rather than the traditional methods of research which often focus on problems and ask the question *what is wrong* within an organization, AI focuses on *what is right* and *what breathes life* within a system and dreams of how things *could be* (Cooperrider, n.d.). It assumes the existence of strengths and positive attributes of an organization and the people within it (Quinney & Richardson, 2014). Discovering these strengths, mobilizing them to imagine changes within an ideal version of the current system, and then designing plans to create and sustain this dream are all integral to the AI process (Cooperrider, 2012). The activities conducted throughout the research phases of AI generate hope, excitement and renewed investment as people are provided with a voice as well as opportunities to begin to consider possibilities for change and how things *could be* (Bushe, 2013). The AI process

is transformative and builds capacity as participants explore the potential for change and innovation.

Research Areas of Inquiry

There are elements of strength-based pedagogy which are evident in current practices being implemented in schools locally as well as globally. Many classroom educators conceptualize the importance of the development of environmental elements of relatedness, autonomy support as well as personal global competencies within their established learning ecosystems (Rickabaugh, 2016). Convictions of educators and educational stakeholders have added these strength-focused elements at the classroom level without being enveloped within a specific unifying framework. Identifying and organizing these practices within specific themes and patterns within the scope of a proposed second continuum of inclusionary education will allow educators to become more aware of and accountable for the establishment of an environmental support structure that takes into account individual strengths, mobilizing them, encouraging learners to flourish within their educational settings. To this end, Keyes' dual-dimensional model was applied as a lens through which to investigate the use of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classrooms settings. Due to its strength-based nature, an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Action Research Design (Stowell, 2012; Cooperrider et al., 2000) was used to engage educators as research participants and collaborators in investigating the challenges, successes, and lessons learned associated with the implementation of strength-based practices within inclusionary educational settings. Appreciative Inquiry allowed for the conversation to be shaped around the positive practices which are currently in place. AI methods also provided opportunities

for elaborating on and co-creating new perspectives and practices for enhancing strength-based approaches within inclusionary educational settings.

At each phase of the AI cycle, targeted research questions were posed to participants in both individual interview and focus group settings that assisted in uncovering key insights and descriptions related to effective methods for applying strength-based concepts and practices within a supported-oriented and strength-focused model of inclusionary education.

Research Questions

For my doctoral research, I examined current inclusionary education structures in various contexts: classroom, school, district and departmental. Research participants were identified as influencers who were actively engaging in the implementation of strength-based practices within a support-oriented model of inclusive education. The research questions were developed to uncover key insights and encourage rich descriptions related to effective methods for applying strength-based concepts and practices within a dual dimensional approach to inclusionary education. My central research question explored:

> "*What specific strength-based concepts and practices are essential for supporting a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education that encompasses dimensions related to both support-oriented methods and the promotion of flourishing for all students?"*

From this global research question, several underlying questions were formulated in line with the AI design and methodology for this investigation:

- *From the perspective of educational leaders, educators, and school services personnel, what is the relevance of strength-based practices to the creation of inclusionary learning environments?* (Discovery phase)
- *How are strength-based concepts and practices applied or integrated within inclusionary school and classroom structures and processes?* (Discovery phase)
- *What positive learning enhancements or challenges are associated with integration of such concepts and practices?* (Discovery phase)
- *If you could envision the ideal inclusionary school or classroom that engaged strength-based perspectives and practices, what would it look like?* (Dream Phase)
- *How would they be structured or organized?* (Dream Phase)
- *What key processes, interactions or practices would be evident?* (Dream Phase)
- *How would traditional roles of educators, students, and other partners change, evolve or be transformed within such settings?* (Design Phase)
- *What considerations would be critical for creating readiness among educators to fully embrace such a vision?* (Design Phase)
- *What strategic plans, actions, and processes would be essential for moving forward towards the realization of such a vision?* (Design Phase)

My Position as a Researcher

"Optimism generates hope...hope releases dreams...dreams set goals...enthusiasm follows."

Martin Seligman

The study and research of strength-based practices within an inclusive education system is consistent with my philosophy of teaching. In my role as an elementary level educator of French second language, I have long held the belief of the importance and power of the establishment of authentic relationships built on trust as well as a classroom environment conducive to learning and exploration. Each fall I am presented with a new group of learners and endeavor to establish these relationships and identify their individual strengths so that I may design learning opportunities to engage all learners, encouraging them to meet their full potential. As the needs of students entering our classrooms continue to present themselves as more diverse and complex, the knowledge gleaned from my graduate studies in educational psychology, focusing on exceptional learners, reinforced my belief in the importance of identifying and mobilizing student strengths, providing increased opportunities for voice and choice to promote student engagement in learning.

From my experience as an educator, many of applied approaches and models within inclusive education model often reinforce a solely deficit-oriented perspective placing emphasis on a support services approach to meeting the diverse learning needs of students. My continued studies at the doctoral level have reaffirmed my belief in the importance of embracing a more strength-based approach to inclusionary education as well as in the acknowledgement of a potential second dimension, as conceptualized by Keyes (2002) within the field of mental health, highlighting the establishment of environmental features within the inclusionary classroom setting which provide the suitable conditions for student flourishing.

Through my research study, I hoped to provide educators with the opportunity to engage in conversations framed from a strength-based approach with the intent of exploring their recognition and perspectives professionals regarding application of strengths within inclusive school and classroom settings. I also anticipated that these discussions would allow educators to envision specific strength-oriented practices that would contribute to the conditions necessary for student learning and flourishing.

Research Methods

Research Proposal Defense and Ethics Process

The nature of any participatory research method requires open and honest communication between the researcher and the participants. At the forefront of my proposed data collection activities, it was always critical for me that the wellbeing of the research participants be protected. Dewar (2011) notes that it is crucial to have an established code of conduct communicated explicitly with research participants from the onset of the research project that is stringently followed through its duration. To this end, I followed the protocols for research ethics as required by the ethics committees at UNB.

In the summer of 2020, I completed my doctoral proposal defence. Subsequently, I completed and submitted the forms required to comply with the University of New Brunswick Tri-Councils Ethics process. At the close of August 2020, I received approval from both the Faculty and Education and the Office of Research at UNB to move forward with my proposed doctoral investigation.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

Patton (2015) notes that purposeful sampling is appropriate when choosing "cases for study (e.g., people, organizations, communities, cultures, events, critical incidences)"

because they are “information rich” and “illuminative” as they are able to provide authentic insight with regard to the identified area of inquiry being studied, rather than empirical generalization from a sample to a population. My research consisted of a purposeful sample of educators from school, district and departmental levels who had been identified as leaders and key influencers in the development and application of inclusive educational practices, beyond the traditional support-oriented approaches, encompassing innovative strength-based concepts and practices within school and classroom settings. The selection of potential participants occurred in collaboration with members of my doctoral committee and consultation with their colleagues from the NB Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, both having key knowledge and linkages to educational leaders and influencers currently engaged innovative strength-focused methods within our local, regional, and provincial educational settings. Participants professional experience in the field of education ranged approximately from eighteen to thirty-eight years. The individual interviews (Discovery Phase) consisted of eight participants and expanded to ten for the subsequent focus group interviews (Dream and Design Phases).

Research Design and Methods

My participants were professionals within the field of education who were able to illuminate and contribute key insights and understandings regarding the application of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom settings. Given my research focus, the use of AI design and methods was viewed as an appropriate and beneficial choice for encouraging the collaborative and participatory engagement of

key leaders and influencers who are currently immersed in the development and implementation of strength-based methods.

For this research endeavour, the AI Discovery, Dream and Design phases served to guide my data collection phases. Beginning with the Discovery Phase, participants were invited to explore and provide clarity related to the existing use and challenges associated with strength-based concepts and practices. The Dream Phase allowed participants to work collaboratively to reframe identified challenges and explore potential areas of innovation and application related to strength-based methods. The final data collection activity, the Design Phase, facilitated the collective exploration and delineation of approaches and potential directions for realization of a dual-dimensional model for inclusionary education comprised of support-oriented and strength-focused dimensions by participants. The fourth phase of the AI process, the Destiny Phase, was addressed within my final discussion of this dissertation, focusing on the implications of the findings associated with this research endeavour in its entirety, following the completion of the data collection activities and subsequent analysis from the preceding AI phases.

This study took place following the timeline below: Fall 2019 – Affirmative Topic Choice\Reframing; Fall 2020 – Discovery Phase Interviews; Winter 2021 – Dream Phase Focus Group; Spring 2021 – Design Phase Focus Group; Fall 2021\Winter 2022 – Destiny Phase.

Discovery Phase

"*What specific strength-based concepts and practices are essential for supporting a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary educational that encompasses*

dimensions related to both support oriented-methods and the promotion of flourishing for all students?"

At the outset of the Discovery Phase, the focal area of inquiry for this investigation was reviewed with participants. The intent of the Discovery Phase was to elicit personal experiences and stories from participants that highlighted their use, experience and observations of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school systems and classrooms. This included exploring with participants guiding assumptions, personal insights and perspectives, strategies, and methods, as well as challenges and successes that were associated with their current application of strength-based approaches within inclusionary educational settings.

For the Discovery Phase each participant was invited to a semi-structured interview which lasted between 60-90 minutes. Interviews were completed through interactive online technologies (Zoom) which allowed sessions to be recorded, with participant consent, for later transcription. Field notes were also taken, providing insight to initial thoughts, themes, and categories. Interview questions were designed to elicit narratives to richly describe experiences in which educators felt engaged, excited, and confident in their students' learning as a result of the use of strength-based concepts and practices, as well as specific instances where challenges were encountered and worked through related to the application of strength-focused methods.

According to Acosta and Douthwaite (2005) AI interviews seek to explore stories rather that to elicit the opinions of participants. Through stories, participants "can connect with the richness of their circumstances", reminding them of specific settings, people

involved, enabling circumstances, practices, or interactions, as well as prior history and subsequent outcomes (p. 2).

Key areas of inquiry that guided the Discovery Phase included:

- *From your perspective and those of other educational leaders, educators, and school services personnel, what is the relevance of strength-based practices to the creation of inclusionary learning environments?*
- *How do you apply or integrate strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom structures and processes?*
- *What positive learning enhancements or challenges are associated with the application or integration of such concepts and practices?*

Upon completion of individual participants' interviews, an initial analysis and synthesis was completed, identifying emerging themes and categories arising from the initial data gathering process.

Dream Phase

The second phase of the AI cycle was intended to invite participants to consider what their vision is or what an *ideal future* might be for the applications of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary schools and classroom settings. For this data collection effort, participants were provided with a succinct summary, which include graphic representations which highlighted some of the key themes and categories that emerged within and across interviews from the Discovery Phase. This summary was reviewed at the beginning of the focus group session, highlighting existing strength-based concepts and practices, and provided a basis from which participants began to dream, envision, and conceive what could be created, developed, or optimized in terms of

strength-based methods within a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary schools and classrooms in the future.

For this phase, a focus group was carried out with participants who completed interviews in the initial Discovery Phase. Similar to the individual interviews, AI focus groups incorporated a semi-structured format with common areas of inquiry providing a focus for sharing and exploring stories and eliciting insights related to enhancing the use of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom settings (Knibbs et al., 2010). The focus group was conducted using an interactive online platform (Zoom), which allowed the session to be recorded with the permission of all participants. Summary notes were once again taken by the researcher over the course of the focus group interviews to be reviewed during the data analysis process.

The focal questions that guided this second data collection phase were:

- *If you could envision the ideal inclusionary school or classroom that engaged strength-based perspectives and practices, what would it look like?*
- *How would they be structured or organized?*
- *What key processes, interactions or practices would be evident?*

Upon the completion of the focus group interviews, an initial analysis and synthesis was completed, identifying emerging themes and categories arising from this second data gathering process represented through a graphic.

Design Phase

The third phase of the AI process, the Design Phase, invited participants to explore and propose various propositions for amplifying and embedding the application of strength-based concepts and practices within a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary

education, moving their conceptualization from the Dream Phase towards potential realization (Acosta & Douthwaite, 2005). At the outset of this data collection effort, participants were provided with a summary analysis from the previous Dream Phase focus group. This summary included a graphic representation of the key themes and categories that emerged from the Dream Phase's focus group deliberations. The summary provided the starting point from which to explore and conceive foundational elements for proposing or structuring a practical vision for the potential realization of a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education where strength-based methods and practices would be implemented and embedded in daily classroom and school-based practice.

For this data collection phase, a focus group of 60-90 minutes was carried out with participants who took part in the previous Dream Phase focus group. Beyond the semi-structured interview format used to facilitate this focus group, summary notes were once again taken by the researcher throughout the focus group session (Klagge, 2018; Knibbs et al., 2010). The central questions that guided this final data collection activity were:

- *How would the traditional roles of educators, students, and other partners change, evolve or be transformed within such settings?*
- *What considerations would be critical for creating readiness among educators to fully embrace such a vision?*
- *What strategic plans, actions and processes would be essential for moving forward towards realization of such a vision?*

Upon completion of the focus group interviews, an initial analysis and synthesis was completed, identifying, and clarifying themes and categories which arose from this final

data gathering process. This summary was submitted to research participants for their further reflection and elaboration.

Destiny Phase

According to Cooperrider (2012), "the Destiny Phase represents both the conclusion of the Discovery, Dream, and Design phases and the beginning of an ongoing creation of an 'appreciative learning culture'" (https://www.davidcooperrider.com/ai-process/). Within this endeavour, this aspect of the research process consisted of examining the implications of the findings which emerged and were expanded upon throughout the various participant interview and focus group data collection phases. Given that the central area of inquiry of this research was to investigate the application of strength-based concepts and practices to support a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education, the culmination of the AI research process within the Destiny Phase involved examining potential directions for incorporating the co-created insights from participants into potential innovations in education that may be applied or further investigated within inclusionary school or classroom settings. The completion of this phase has been incorporated and elaborated upon in the final discussion chapter of this dissertation.

Data Management

The various methods for collecting data throughout the phases of the AI research cycle were described in the previous sections. Throughout the various phases of the research, interview and focus group methods attended to issues of maintaining privacy, confidentiality, ethics, and consent. According to Patton (2015), environmental conditions play an important role when undertaking interviews and focus groups with

research participants. To this end, I endeavoured to create a virtual environment that was comfortable and conducive to authentic discussion and ease of sharing experiences. Individual interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, allowing for them to be transcribed at a later time. Copious field notes were taken, including the dated and time when each interview and focus groups took place. These notes provided descriptive and anecdotal evidence of the social environmental conditions as well as interactions experienced during each of the data collection sessions. All documents containing personal or confidential information were stored on a password protected computer. Each electronic file was assigned an ID number for identification.

Data Analysis

According to Patton (2015) data analysis is the "sense-making efforts that take a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p. 453).

Data that results from qualitative studies require an analysis process that allows for these vast amounts of data to be refined and organized in a way that allows for key insights and understandings from the research endeavour to be drawn (Thomas, 2006). For this research effort an inductive content analysis approach was applied to analyze specific strength-based concepts and practices within a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education that emerged from the various data collection phases, inclusive of participants' responses to key themes arising from the Describe, Dream and Design phases. Inductive methods are evident in much of qualitative data analysis, particularly within the fields of health, education, and the social sciences. The term inductive implies that through researchers' extensive readings and analyses of the transcribed data that key

themes, categories, models, or frameworks will emerge from the gathered content (Thomas, 2006). Consistent with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) description of the inductive methods, "the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data" (p. 12). In contrast to deductive approaches which analyze data according to pre-set categories or prior assumptions, theories or constructs, inductive methods seek to uncover significant themes that arise from the data, investigating their relevance to and relationship with one another (Thomas, 2006).

For my research endeavour, inductive methods were applied within a conventional content analysis approach. Conventional content analysis approaches are applied when the purpose of the investigation is to describe a specific area of focus or phenomenon, especially when arising literature in a given area is minimal or limited (Hsief & Shannon, 2005). Investigations using applied methods do not make use of "preconceived categories; rather allow for categories and names for categories to flow from the data" (Hsief & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279).

Conventional content analysis differs from directed, and summative approaches to content analysis in terms of how codes are developed. Regarding conventional content analysis, codes and categories emerge from the data during the process of data analysis, whereas with a directed content analysis, investigators apply theory or previous research to create preliminary codes or categories before analysing the data. Summative content analysis differs from both conventional and directed formats in terms of its emphasis on the examination of key words identified before or during the analysis. This summative approach considers and explores the meaning of key words or terms within the context of all the data (Hsief & Shannon, 2005).

The Process of Inductive Coding

Consistent with a conventional content analysis, I initiated the process of inductive coding by undertaking an in-depth reading of all transcribed data (individual and focus group sessions) and written information (e.g., field notes; research journals, memos) that were created during the data collection phases. The intent of this initial step was to become immersed in the data, experiencing a deep level of familiarity to its content. Subsequently, I embarked on the identification of text segments that reflected *"meaningful units"* and then assigned them a label or code. Saldana (2016) defines *a code* within qualitative inquiry as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of data" (p. 4).

This initial stage of the coding process, sometimes referred to as open *coding*, involved my continuous comparison of data, asking questions as to what was and was not yet understood regarding the focus of inquiry. Codes were subsequently clustered into specific theme areas or categories.

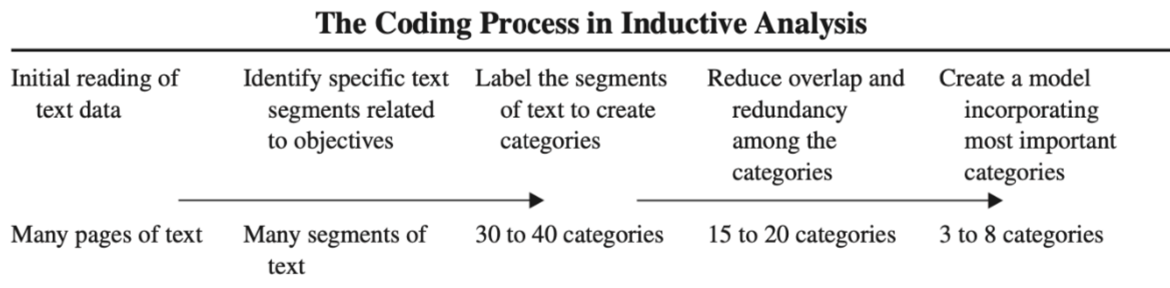
Based on the process of coding, I created initial descriptions reflecting the meaning of each category, writing memos regarding the nature of the given theme area. According to Thomas (2006) categories "may also be linked to other categories in various relationships, such as a network, a hierarchy of categories or causal sequence" (p. 241). As the various research phases, codes and categories and the affinity among categories began to shape as emergent processes or framework.

Implemented Procedures to Guide Inductive Content Analysis

My analysis of interview and focus group transcriptions was guided by Thomas' (2006) five procedures for inductive content analysis of qualitative data as outlined in Figure 13. A concise description of my implementation of these methods follows:

Figure 13

Inductive Coding Process



Thomas, 2006

Preparation of raw data (data cleaning). For this research endeavour, data consisted of digital recordings of individual participant and focus group interviews, as well as research field notes and visual representations that were created and shared as a result of focus group discussions. Print copies were stored for each raw data file as a backup (Antoniadou, 2017; Thomas, 2006; Zamawe, 2015) using a common format, highlighting interviewer comments and questions.

Close reading of text. Once data was transcribed into text form, I read them with the intent of familiarizing myself with their content, gaining a deeper sense of potential themes that were become apparent or evident from the transcribed data. Multiple rounds of readings of these transcribed texts were undertaken over course my entire research program. This process of rereading at various points in my analysis facilitated a progressive understanding of emerging themes throughout my research journey (Thomas,

2006). Saldana (2016) advises that emergent themes may be noted anecdotally as memos to be reviewed at a later stage of the data analysis process. I kept a research journal throughout my entire doctoral program and, throughout the data analysis phases, used this practice as a means of noting my first impressions, initial thoughts or analysis which proved to provide a critical reference point for later review in the process of data analysis.

Creation of codes and categories. My next step involved carrying out the process of inductive coding. For this effort, I undertook the identification of text segments that related meaningfully to my focal area of inquiry. For selected portions of text, codes were developed and labelled according to the salient features or essence of the selected data. Continuous sorting, analyzing, and coding the raw data occurred throughout the data collection process (Kolb, 2012).

Once codes had been created for the selected text segments, the potential for organizing codes according to emergent categories become apparent given the recognition of emergent affinities or relatedness of among identified codes. Subsequently, codes with common or relatable themes were grouped or clustered into emerging categories. Categories served to provide organization to the wide array of codes by grouping them into meaningful clusters (Saldana, 2016; Hsief & Shannon, 2005). Descriptions for these categories were developed to reflect the meaning and nature of the themes contained within each of them (Thomas, 2006).

Reduction of overlapping and Redundancy in Codes and Categories. After initial coding and categorization had been completed, a second round of analysis was completed to further refine my interpretation of the data, reducing areas of overlap or redundancy (Saldana, 2016). Through this second round of coding, the original codes and

categories became more refined and conceptualized. Certain of the original codes became encompassed within pre-existing codes or relabeled to form new ones. Thomas (2006) notes that within qualitative research “one segment of text may be coded into more than one category” (p. 242) based on its significance to the focal areas of inquiry.

Emergent Frameworks or Models. From the inductive coding process and the sorting of these codes, my descriptions of these units of analysis also encompassed depictions of the dynamic interactions and processes and relatedness among various theme categories (e.g., Cycle of Gap Mindset; Strength-based Mindset; Areas of Professional Dissonance; Strength-based Practices; Role of Leadership, and Process for Change). As Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) note the recognition of emergent connections or dynamics among themes categories or the emergence of overarching theme categories provide the foundation for the development of potential conceptual constructs, models, or frameworks.

Figure 14

Sample Research Codes

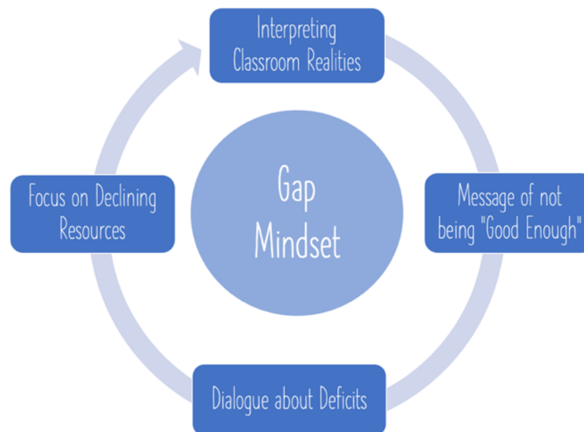
	Raw Text	Code
TR	because I wanted to do it for three years. you know how they say you need to do three years?	Time for positive change in classroom
TR	curriculum is a guide. I know that we need to have standards and kids need to leave school with a certain you know baggage, but it can't rule everything because you miss the kids. like you need to always go back there.	Student vs curriculum centric; missing kids
JT	We've flipped the structure	structural change
JT	So, we've flipped the traditional model. And the luxury here is, you're coming in and I can schedule your first period class as your hook. So traditionally in a high school if you're really good at English you would run 5 or 6 sections of that. Well guess what, they're all full so you're going to be in the 11 o'clock class. But here I have the luxury of putting you in the first period class. So that gets you to school.	adapting operational structure to use the hook of strengths
CT	The long-term impact of kids in classrooms with disruptive children is very negative long term, when it comes to their academic progress and their financial progress.	long-term impact of ineffective inclusionary practices
CT	The system is not working for a lot of kids now	need for systemic change

Figure 15

Theme Categories

Figure 16

Initial Framework Sample



Trustworthiness of Data

Over the course of my research program, trustworthiness of the data was a critical consideration. Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified four key criteria for pursuing the

trustworthiness of data emerging from qualitative studies. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). The following sections outline the specific methods I employed to address these constructs within my program of research.

Credibility

For qualitative researchers, credibility deals with the question of the level of congruence with the reported experience of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Shenton (2004, p. 64) proposes a set of provisions that can be used by researchers in order to promote credibility of the findings within their area of inquiry. For the purpose of my research, I selected the four following provisions:

- *The adoption of research methods established in the literature for qualitative investigations.*

  For my proposed research, I used Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that drew on the perspectives and lived experiences of participants who were able to illuminate key insights relating to the application of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom settings.

- *The researcher's reflective commentary.*

  The recording of reflective commentary throughout the length of my research process served to document my initial and ongoing impressions during each data collection activity. Guba and Lincoln (1994) assert that the commentary can play a crucial role by monitoring the development of the researcher's own perceptual constructs, which can be critical to the establishment of credibility.

- *Member Checks*.

Perhaps the most important provision that can be made to establish credibility is the use of check-ins with research participants to ensure the accuracy of the data being collected. These check-ins can take place in the moment or at the end of each data collection activity or session. Check-ins can be completed by allowing each participant to read through any of the summary of themes that have been prepared, transcripts of the interviews or focus groups in which they participated as well as final discussions produced as a result of the Destiny phase (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Shenton, 2004). Member checks were part of my research methods and were incorporated following each phase of my data collection cycle.

- *Thick description of the phenomenon being investigated.*

  According to Shenton (2004) the use of thick descriptions helps "convey the actual situations that have been investigated and, to an extent, the contexts that surround them" (p. 65). For my research, data gathered from both individual and focus group interviews provided a rich source of information for the creation of detailed descriptions of themes which arose from the focal areas of inquiry.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of the results of the qualitative research to be applied to a broader context (Shenton, 2004). Guba and Lincoln (1994) assert that the responsibility of the researcher is to ensure that there is a sufficient contextual representation within the sites and participants to allow such a transfer to be made. Shenton (2004) iterates the need for adequate information to be given to readers to provide the opportunity and consideration for transference. For my research, I included participants from various educational contexts and roles (grade levels, programs,

professional responsibilities). This broad scope of research participants will assist readers in assessing the applicability of the findings of my study to their own inclusionary classroom settings and practices.

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability involves providing sufficient detail related to the given research design and methods employed so that similar investigations could be repeated to explore related phenomenon within another context. To provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the design and methods applied in my research, the methods and results section of my dissertation includes detailed and clear descriptions of:

- The research design that was applied
- The data collection methods that were implemented, as well as
- Identification of challenges and successes experienced throughout the research process.

Confirmability

Shenton (2004) describes confirmability as the steps:

> taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher (p. 72).

An essential feature of confirmability as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) is the degree to which researchers openly acknowledge their own predispositions and biases. In my research study, the use of reflective journaling, and the process of member checking served to contribute to greater confirmability.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the theoretical frameworks used to guide my Appreciative Inquiry approach and provided details about the research. The rationale for the choice to use AI for this research investigation was reviewed. Details about the design of the research and methods used were also discussed. In addition, data collection, management, analysis, and questions of ethics were delineated. The chapter concluded with a discussion about issues of trustworthiness and authenticity. The results of the research study will be shared in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Results

For my research endeavour, the implementation of the Appreciative Inquiry research design encompassed the following four phases: *Discovery; Dream; Design; and Destiny*. Each phase served a specific purpose in uncovering insights related to the investigation of strength-based practices with each phase building on the findings from the preceding one. This chapter explores the results of the first three phases of this research initiative. Interspersed throughout the study's findings are quotations from participants which contribute to the narrative element of this participatory action research investigation. Implications associated with the Destiny Phase, the final aspect of the Appreciative Inquiry design, are examined the discussion chapter.

The Discovery Phase

For the Discovery Phase, data collection activities involved the completion of individual participant interviews. A total of eight participants consented and completed their respective interviews via Zoom with each session ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in duration. The intent of the Discovery Phase was to elicit personal experiences and stories from participants' that highlighted their application of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school systems and classrooms. This entailed exploring with participants their guiding assumptions and personal insights relating to the relevance of the use of strengths within inclusionary classrooms, as well as strategies and methods undertaken in the application of strength-based approaches. Encountered challenges and perceived successes related to use of strength-based approaches also emerged throughout participant interviews.

Each interview session provided opportunities for participants to reflect on strength-based perspectives and practices in the context of their previous professional experiences within inclusionary education and its unfolding over several decades within New Brunswick. Four participants recalled the initial emergence of mainstreaming initiatives in education during the mid-80s and the development of more inclusive structures over the next several decades. Other participants reflected on the more recent application of inclusionary structures and the elaboration of perspectives and practices related to both support and strength-oriented approaches. The unfolding of inclusionary practices also revealed shifting perspectives over time related to the perceived relevance of strength-focused approaches in supporting student development and learning. At the completion of all individual participant interviews, data were transcribed and analyzed, revealing six major theme categories for the Discovery Phase. Each category also encompassed a series of underlying subthemes based on codes that emerged from the process of inductive analysis. Table 2 provides a summary of the major categories and their respective underlying themes associated with the Discovery Phase.

Table 2

Discovery Phase Themes and Subthemes

Theme
Theme 1: ***The Unfolding of Inclusionary Education:*** *Sameness; Achievement and Mastery; Bubble Kids; Preoccupation with Problems*
Theme 2: ***Gap-oriented Perspectives:*** *Classroom Realities; Not Good Enough; Dialogue about Deficits; Focus on Declining Resources*
Theme 3: ***Areas of Professional Dissonance:*** *Gaps vs. Strengths; Curriculum-focused vs. Student-centered; Fix vs. Empower; Strengths as Add-on vs. Strength Embedded*
Theme 4: ***Emergent Strength-based practices:*** *Student Centric; Well-being Practices*
Theme 5: ***Experienced and Envisioned Impacts of Applied Strengths:*** *Positive Classroom Culture; Coping & Resiliency (Facing Challenges Through Strengths); Enhanced Engagement & Motivation; Students Experience Success (Shine!)*
Theme 6: ***Pursing a Strength-based Paradigm:*** *Role of Leadership (priorities leveraging educator strengths, modeling autonomy support); Needing a Process of Change (Integrating support and strength-oriented dimensions; Shared vision, community of strengths; demystifying the process)*

Theme 1: Unfolding of Inclusionary Education: *Sameness; Achievement and Mastery; Bubble Kids; Preoccupation with Problems*

> "*We had no idea what it was… in many ways it basically was this idea that kids were often in alternate sites were brought back into the school system…and so, the inclusion mentality was more of like an integration.*"

Participants who were within school contexts during the mid 80s and early 90s, described initial steps toward inclusion following the closure of segregated schools and classrooms and the moving of all students within the same settings. This was a new school experience and one for which educators were not necessarily prepared or certain about how to navigate these shifts and changes within their respective classrooms. Various participants spoke of students with specific learning needs being placed on

individualized plans without the benefit of differentiated practices or universal accommodations being used in the classroom. The incorporation of pull-out strategies, the development of the resource educator role, the use of direct resource interventions, and the implementation of teacher-assistant teams were among some of the support structures that emerged to assist students with special learning needs or exceptionalities. Rather than a model that celebrated diversity, one participant shared that initial efforts to facilitate integration focused on helping students to *fit in* or be *the same* as others with respect to learning or behaviour. The idea of *sameness* was described in terms of approximating the notion of *an average learner*. As another participant further explained even though students were in the same classroom, there was still seemed to be less emphasis on understanding and fully valuing student differences or diversity.

A few participants noted that in the initial years of integration there was a targeted focus on student *achievement and mastery*. During this time, the role of educators was described in terms of ensuring that the majority students would *get it*, speaking of the curriculum objectives before moving on to the next learning concept or skill. More broadly, participants spoke of educators feeling pressed to ensure that students were ready to move from one grade level to the next. Several participants indicated that educational priorities and approaches during the early years of integration, as well as more recent times, have attached a priority value to academic achievement and the support structures or strategies required to ensure students' mastery of the curriculum. One participant highlighted that when achievement outcomes for all becomes a sole focus, the notion of students' strengths "*may not enter the conversation*", be understood or be considered in terms of students' individual academic development or engagement.

This insight suggests that students' strengths, interests and ultimately their potential may be left untapped or omitted all together. As one participant asserted: *"I think it's (strengths) still misunderstood…for so long, we've been working on gaps. With gaps you have your curriculum and either you get it, or you don't."*

In one interview, the term *Bubble Kids* was used to depict students who struggled in meeting mainstream classroom expectations and those who required additional or more intensive support to succeed. In some instances, *Bubble Kids* were highlighted as having not only academic challenges, but also behavioural issues especially if they did not enjoy or feel engaged by efforts to intervene, remediate, or reinforce specific learning content or skills. As one participant highlighted:

> *"If a kid struggles in reading, and know that they struggle with reading, it's usually not something that they enjoy doing. So, what do we do? We hit them with even more, intensive, concentrated reading sessions. This just furthers their disengagement unless we factor in their strengths."*

A *preoccupation with challenges or problems*, and the notion of adding more intervention supports, was not necessarily perceived as effective in engaging students academically. When disengagement was accompanied by disruptive behaviors, classroom learning environments were described as adversely impacted for all students. For some participants, the development of support strategies in the early years of integration were undertaken without a specific focus or intentional emphasis being considered related to strengths. Others asserted that the use of student strengths continues to be minimally applied in the development of support strategies for students even in our current inclusionary approaches. In terms of students with academic and behavioral concerns,

inflexible, more punitive, or deterrent-oriented policies were viewed as potentially impeding opportunities for connecting or re-connecting with students, getting to know them better and becoming more aware of their strengths. As one participant in recalling their efforts to engage the strengths of students with learning and behavioural concerns highlighted:

> *"When you're using programming pieces (focusing on strengths) with kids who are at risk, a lot of policies may be adversarial to the actual progress of the child ... you're bound by the consequences… School policies haven't evolved to where we are…They are punitive policies."*

Theme 2: Gap-oriented Perspectives**:** *Classroom Realities, Not Good Enough; Dialogue about Deficits; Declining Resources*

Participants highlighted that the move towards a more inclusive model of education has been accompanied by an increase in the range of student needs related to academic, behavioural, social, and emotional concerns. *Classroom realities* for teachers involves encountering a wide array of student needs each day in their classrooms. For many educators there is a sense of feeling overwhelmed, not equipped, and under-supported to meet these needs. Participants asserted that responding to classroom realities entailed meeting challenge of finding ways to engage students, how to keep them included, motivated and moving forward in meeting academic and curriculum goals; otherwise, they withdraw, are not engaged, and classroom interactions become strained and behavioral issues emerge. All participants shared similar experiences about the growing diversity, shifting complexity and changing composition of many classrooms within New Brunswick's inclusive education model. *"We're seeing more (student needs),*

either because it's the first time we've looked or because we're not removing people from schools. We're seeing more issues to deal with…."

In addition, participants highlighted that the move toward more inclusive practices has also involved the emergence of specific support-oriented structures and intervention strategies focused on ensuring that all students move forward in a similar rhythm of learning. Participants highlighted that those students who continue to encounter academic difficulties in the *mainstream* in spite of the provision of additional support or intervention strategies often perceive themselves differently, not achieving in the same way as others, and in some sense not being *good enough* in comparison to their peers. As one participant asserted *"You don't get it, so we try to get you to get it and if you don't, you're just not good enough."* Participants indicated that students are generally aware of their areas of academic challenges. For those who struggle year after year in one or more curriculum area, they often experience lower levels of self-esteem or self-worth even though they have been recipients of ongoing academic support. The message seems to be reinforced to students is that they are "*not smart", "not capable*" and, "*not good enough*". Over time such views seem to become internalized, emerging as personal views of who they are and their potential.

Participants also highlighted times when they themselves and other educators also encountered and struggle with feelings of not being *good enough*. Although there was consensus among participants that most educators have a personal sense of calling and strive to make a positive difference in the lives of students, the challenge of meeting the varying needs of students from diverse backgrounds in addition to the *perceived push* for all students to succeed academically and meet curricular outcomes can be *all-consuming*

and *overwhelming*. As one participant expressed... "*most teachers are extraordinary people, in extraordinary roles, doing extraordinary things. Our teachers are good. They care a lot about our children, but they can get tired".*

Several participants expressed that when educators put their best efforts forward and students still continue to struggle thoughts may emerge in the form of self-statements such as: *"Am I doing enough?", "I should be doing more.", "What am I doing wrong?", "Maybe I am not a good teacher after all."* Some participants pointed to times when they themselves and other educators had experienced periods in their professional life when such thoughts or self- statements emerged and especially when daily activities felt stressful, all encompassing, and depleting.

Participants highlighted that recognition and *dialogue about deficits* related to individual student needs or concerns often focus in large part on defining area of concerns or the impact of immediate problems. Therefore, the content of problem-solving meetings, staff interactions, and encounters with parents are often characterized as focusing exclusively on dialogue about specific gaps or what is missing. Some participants also indicated informal conversations among educators may have a tendency to become problem bound, focusing exclusively on what is *not working.* As one participant mentioned: "*We kind of just focus on what bothers us. That's another issue because that becomes what defines the child or the learner*."

There was a general belief conveyed by participants that students need to see themselves as being *capable learners* and that the adults in their lives need to share the same beliefs.

Dialoguing about areas of deficit was also closely linked with conversations about inadequate and *declining resources*, especially those viewed as essential for supporting students and addressing gaps or areas of challenge related to their academic development. As one participant asserted: *"how do you implement policy, processes, where people are getting the services, they need…We don't have ample resources in school. We have either sufficient or lacking. If we really want to solve the problem, put in the resources."*

One participant highlighted the importance of engaging resources in a different light, suggesting that they be applied taking into account positive aspects of student lives or their strengths placing emphasis on more proactive and preventative approaches.

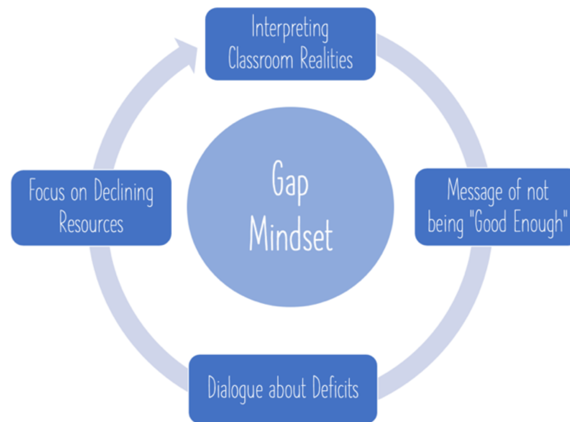
> *"If we put more energy focusing on the positive side we would gain so much in terms of resources. We put an enormous amount of energy in after it's too late. Not too late, but later in the process as a reaction. But I like the idea of prevention".*

Another participant further explained that engaging resources that are more personalized to students and their strengths entails having individual conversations that value and convey a sense of appreciation for their perspectives and input.

> *"When we think about so these practices again it doesn't have to be expensive. If I'm talking to a student who has an EA I'm not talking to the EA; I'm talking with the student and making eye contact so that they feel valued and appreciated."*

Figure 17

Gap Mindset

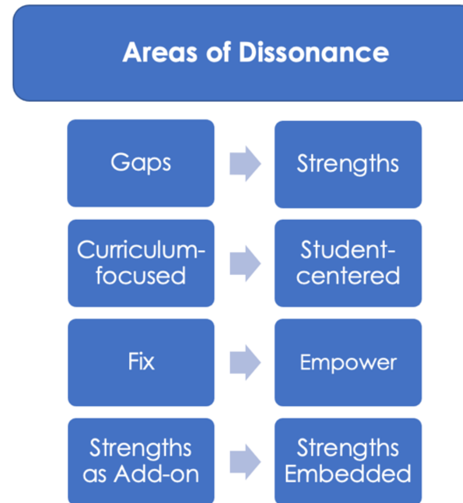


Theme 3: Areas of Professional Dissonance: *Gaps vs. Strengths; Curriculum-focused vs. Student-centered; Fix vs. Empower; Strengths as Add-on vs. Strength Embedded*

Through the Discovery Phase, participants highlighted two distinct views that at times seemed contrasting yet intertwining in the discussion of past and current inclusionary approaches in education. These views came forward as areas of inquiry inviting participants to consider the relevance and application of strength-based methods within the context of their respective classrooms and schools. These views emerged as points of *push and pull* or struggle in terms of the relevance, role, and incorporation of strength-guided practices. To some extent these points of tension presented themselves as themes of dissonance, not fully resolved or clarified, representing two dimensions, one focusing on concerns with gaps associated with existing challenges and the other with strengths and potential for the future.

Figure 18

Areas of Professional Dissonance



Four themes of dissonance encompassing divergence in thoughts, beliefs or even practice were identified by participants. The first point of dissonance highlighted the preoccupation with problems related to student learning and *gaps* in achievement that grow over time in contrast to the need to uncover students' *strengths* and build their confidence. As various participants asserted:

> *"Well, you have this gap, and we need to you to get it before you go to something else. You're starting from a standpoint where it's already negative. There's a problem, yes, but I can't see that people can develop their confidence or their self-esteem. always being in a problem."*
>
> *"When you work in a strict strength-based situation rather than in gaps, you're building and you're adding to what you already have. What you have is good."*

The second point of dissonance involved an exclusive emphasis on *curriculum-focused* content and expectations in setting directions for student learning without sufficient knowledge and understanding about the student. In other words, prioritizing

knowledge of curriculum or *student-centered* approaches as the driving force for decisions about educational practice or support. One participant noted that when we are solely curriculum-focused and students are not being successful, we always "*need to go back there*" to get to know them personally in order to plan relevant strategies.

> *"…the curriculum is a guide. I know that we need to have standards and kids need to leave school with a certain… you know… baggage but it can't rule everything because you miss out on the kids (who they are) … you need to always go back there."*

A third point of divergent emphasis included efforts to *fix problem* or fill gaps through interventions at varying levels of intensity to enhance learning potential or achievement. At the same time, insight from participants suggested that intervention or support without engagement or some level of personal connection with students was not as impactful for student learning. *"Are we looking at fixing them? Are we looking at empowering them? Are we looking at engaging them?"*

> *"In the school system, we look at where the deficits are where the gaps and we always look to fix the problem. So, rather than looking to fix the problem strength based allows us to build on peoples' strengths the personal interests and their passions."*

Inherently, participants spoke of strength-based perspectives and practices and their relevance to life-long learning, purpose and meaning, motivation and engagement; however, the identified tension was still the lack of clarity related to how to embrace strength-focused views or philosophies as well as the translation of these ideas into

practical applications for educators. "*...you can still do all of that and still do strength base. so, I'm thinking that it's not really well understood yet. But we are working on it.*"

> *"I think the major barrier is, well, we've talked about the time, where teachers can't really kind of wrap their head around it .... wrapping their head around it is a big piece in the sense that some teachers can't imagine how to integrate that in their classroom.*

Theme 4: Emergent Strength-based Practices*: Student-centric, Well-being Practices*

Though the previous section highlighted the areas of dissonance identified by participants in relation to the use of strengths within educators' respective educational settings, stressing the need for enhanced integration of strength-based and *student-centric* approaches to highlight learner strengths within current approaches to learning, they also provided examples of applied and/or observed strength-based practices that have begun to emerge in pockets of classrooms and schools throughout New Brunswick that served to promote student *well-being*. The strength-based approaches provided by participants highlighted, in particular, three areas of focus for engaging students in meaningful and authentic learning experiencing: forming strong relationship or connections with students; the application of students' strengths within learning strategies; and the importance of valuing and inviting student voice and choice in learning activities and content.

Participants all shared the importance of identifying students' strengths, interests, and areas of passion as an initial point of entry, allowing them to access new learning through the use of their existing strengths and abilities. This practice, one participant stated, allows students to feel successful in their achievements. *"I was trying to put these*

kids that learn differently up front and, you know, give them more space and have them feel successful."

Knowing your Students. Establishing meaningful connections with students was a common thread that was woven throughout each participant interview. The different ways in which participants emphasized the importance of connecting and knowing students only serves to highlight the priority that educators need to place on this practice. *"Strength-based doesn't happen unless you know the child in front of you."* Establishing positive connections with students can have an undeniable impact on student learning and success. One participant voiced this fact in saying: *"We know that the sense of belonging and connection to school is one of the key predictors for student achievement, student success. so how are we learning about those?"*

Participants shared many strategies that serve to promote the building of authentic relationships with students, including making eye contact and speaking directly *to* students rather than *at* them. One participant noted that they would always have students' names posted on the door of the classroom, which served to foster the sense of belonging to their classroom community. The use of surveys at the beginning of the year, one participant explained, can serve as a starting point to learn the basic interests and learning styles of students. Beyond that, many participants shared the notion that taking time each day to talk to students and ask them questions about their lives can allow common points of interest to be uncovered. One participant shared a story of one of their *"harder to reach"* students that they struggled to find a point of connection with. They finally discovered that the student was a hockey fan. This became their topic of discussion each morning, sharing perspectives about the previous night's game and predictions for the

outcome of the remaining season's games. Once the lines of communication and connection have been opened, educators can then begin to discover other points of interest or challenge. *"Behind every student, just like every staff member, there is a story. And so, when we get to know that story, this is when we get to form those positive healthy relationships"*

A Belief in Student Ability. Two of the study's participants were particularly passionate when sharing on the subject of personalized learning and how it related to the promotion of student competency. *"Every kid should be on a PLP. Every kid should work at their pace to ensure their success."* The concept of personalized learning allows students to work at their own pace in the style that best suits their learning needs. One participant, a high school principal, referred to their strategy of creating student webs in the development of individual student portfolios, updating them several times throughout the school year as being a strength-based practice currently in place in their school, allowing the uncovering of students' hidden strengths, passions, and abilities. Participants shared that, through identifying students' areas of interest along with their preferred style of learning, students can experience increased confidence, motivation, and success with their learning.

Another specific practice that was shared among participants in this study as it relates to personalized learning was the creation of student portfolios. Students curate the artifacts to be included in their portfolios, based on their ability to describe why it was being included. When students are once again engaged in their learning process and motivated to work to their fullest potential, they begin to develop the capacity to set their own learning goals and articulate their progress using strength-based language. *"Even*

with the kid today who had the emotional damn-burst. I took out his web and showed him where he started and where he is now. He couldn't believe it."

> *"Parent-teacher would be another one where kids really blossom. There is a display of student work and students take their parents through as part of the parent-teacher, using strength-based language. You see the language of expression, all of a sudden, they're using curriculum language to describe what they learned and articulate it in that way."*

One of the primary principles of the strength-based approach is the acknowledgement that each individual possesses their own strengths and abilities. Participants voiced that, through the lens of a strength-based mindset, it is imperative to explore the existence of strengths within students. The role of an educator is to provide the means for students to acquire new knowledge and develop new skills. Part of this is having educators guide students through self-exploration, allowing them to uncover hidden strengths that they might otherwise not know existed. *"Kids gravitate to their strengths and that's what they do in life. So, the sooner you get kids to find their purpose and work on interests…"*

Participants emphasized that exploring students' strengths does not mean that students will not continue to experience challenges. They explained, rather, that students will face these challenges through the application of their strengths. Identifying, mobilizing, and leveraging students' strengths can foster an enormous amount of personal development, allowing students to flourish in many different aspects of their personal lives.

Providing Voice and Choice. Participants identified the importance of fostering a sense of autonomy and support within the inclusionary classroom and school setting as

being a crucial approach within the strength-based paradigm. They described the need for students to feel empowered within the context of their learning. The two most commonly shared practices throughout participant interviews were providing students with voice and choice in what they are learning, and how they demonstrate this learning to others. *"Voice is really important because then they have ownership (over their learning)."*

> *"I think flexibility in the curriculum is really critical. There's more than one way to teach a topic. So, if I'm giving kids some choice and flexibility and a voice, this is really important because then they have ownership. It's about really sitting down and co-constructing with kids. I think even little kids can do that,"*

While autonomy comes from allowing students to have voice and choice in terms of what they learn and how they approach it, support comes from teachers recognizing that learning is a journey and accompanying their students through that process, guiding, and mentoring them. The collaboration and co-creation of learning designs and forms of evaluation are both practices that serve to promote the psychological wellbeing need of autonomy support.

Theme 5: Experienced and Envisioned Impacts of Applied Strengths: *Positive Classroom Culture; Coping & Resiliency (Facing Challenges Through Strengths); Enhanced Engagement & Motivation; Students Experience Success (Shine!)*

In exploring the various facets of the strength-based paradigm, participants noted several positive impacts and implications that the application of a strength-based approach can have on student learning, shifting their experience at school. One of the primary impacts that was noted by several different participants was the establishment of a *positive classroom culture* and learning environment. One participant noted: *"As a*

principal, when you walked into different classrooms, you could tell. You could feel it. The atmosphere is not as … heavy."

Another participant describe the concept of an established positive learning environment as having **"***less disruption in the classroom*". While this sentiment was echoed by several participants, one participant clarified, providing the explanation for this shift. *"You have kids that are motivated. You have kids that believe in themselves and they're learning."*

A number of participants were currently, or had been in the past, in the role of a school administrator. Their perspectives on the observable nature of a positive classroom environment, enriched through the use of strength-based practices, were one of appreciation. One such participant shared:

> *"Are all the hands up? In primary everyone wants to please their teacher. But, at the middle school level …. are they paying attention? As an administrator you can see those practices making a difference from the beginning of the year, through mid-year, and towards the end of the year. You see the students wanting to participate more".*

Another impact shared by participants observed through the application of strength-based concepts and practices was that of *enhanced coping skills*. Participants reflected on the fact that many students experiencing difficulties and externally displaying their frustrations are doing so because they lack certain strategies to cope with those emotions. One participant asserted that: *"If you're using a strength-based approach, you're giving them the tools."* Participants collectively accepted the strength-based principle and philosophical belief that *"all kids have things that they're good at".*

In considering the belief in the context of a struggling learning facing various academic challenges, one participant added that *"when you focus on that (their talents), it helps them manage"*. Participants agreed that students need to understand the relevance of their learning and how it can be applied to their daily lives. One participant shared the following example:

> *"If you're really sucking at math but you are good at shop… guess what? The first class that you have in the morning ... shop. So that you can see why you need the mathematics. And the kids get it."*

Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-determination Theory (SDT) as well as Seligman's (2011) PERMAH model highlight the importance of *student engagement and motivation* in learning. Likewise, participants in this study identified these elements as positive impacts resulting in the application of strengths within our current inclusive system. *"Engagement goes back to teachers asking if they (students) are interested in the topic or interested in the learning of the lesson."*

In considering how educators can be attuned to engagement within their classrooms, one participant provided the following illustration.

> *"You see their eyes. They open up and they twinkle. They (students) want to move ahead. They're motivated. They want to go further. They want to see how much more they can… well it's not 'how much more' it's just 'where they can go from here'"*

Inner motivation, or *drive*, according to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008) can be achieved through the satisfaction of psychological wellbeing needs (relatedness, competency, autonomy support). Within the context of applying a strength-based

approach to student learning, *"that drive is right there. You don't need to create it because it's about that person."* Participants confirmed that their experience evidenced that incorporating students' interests, strengths, and abilities to their learning promotes and activates intrinsic *motivation* among learners. Finally, in considering the application of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary education settings, one participant noted that, "*attendance is up. A lot of these kids are non-attenders and they're attending."* When students are interested and *engaged* in the content of their learning and the approach that the content is being presented, they will be motivated to attend, participate, *"not wanting to miss anything*".

The final impact that was identified by several of the study's participants was that of *students experiencing success*. While the definition of *success* varied among participants, one participant stated that, *"how we define success for one student is not the same for another."* Recognizing that each individual possesses their own strengths, interests, and talents, participants acknowledged that success can look different for each learner depending on their goals and their plans for attaining them.

> "*When we talk about inclusion, we also need to talk about each child working towards their potential. Strength-based means that every kid reaches their potential as a human being, not just as a student, as a curriculum."*

When students' strengths are activated and their interests engaged, one participant noted that, as an educator, you are "*giving that student an opportunity to shine*". Traditional approaches to inclusionary education have served to identify *gaps* or areas of challenge. Shifting the paradigm to incorporate a strength-based approach to inclusionary education, participants felt, *provided space* for students to achieve success. One

participant noted that these successes needed to be recognized to encourage continued progress. *"Let's find ways to celebrate success! The celebration aspect gives kids a lot of encouragement."* These celebrations, again, can look different, depending on the student and their school culture. One participant shared their practice for celebrating student success

> *"They're not going to get the trophies that you would traditionally see in a showcase in a high school. Our display case is filled with kids work and not trophies. Those kids are so proud to see their work on display."*

Theme 6: Pursuing a Strength-based Paradigm: *Role of Leadership (priorities leveraging educator strengths, modeling autonomy support); Needing a Process of Change (Integrating support and strength-oriented dimensions); Shared vision (community of strengths; demystifying the process)*

Through the lens of shifting from a support-oriented paradigm towards one with a more strength-based focus, I began to explore the current use of strength-based concepts, practices, and approaches within the inclusionary education context of New Brunswick schools. Three themes emerged from the analysis of transcribed data that will be explored in the following section.

"One line from the MacKay report has changed my thinking. MacKay said that all kid are exceptional. No kid is average." Through describing the current policies and practices in use within the education system of New Brunswick, participants began to unearth the undeniable deficit-based and gap-focused mindset that has been perpetuated throughout the province's history since its adoption of the inclusive education model in the 1980s. From the stories that were shared, participants expressed the urgent need for a shift in mindset for all educators at all levels of the system to one that considers and applies a more strength-based approach to the delivering of curriculum, ensuring that all

needs of students are being met. Following many of the principles that were outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation, reviewing current literature on the subject on inclusionary education and strength-based models, participants echoed that these beliefs form the foundation for a mindset that appreciates and engages individuals' strengths. *"My mind is the biggest barrier. Your B.Ed. does not prepare you for strength-based learning and teaching. It's about making good things happen."*

For a shift towards a more strength-based mindset to occur and become embedded in practice, there are certain fundamental beliefs that must first be adopted. Participants identified that there first needs to be a firm belief that every individual, regardless of their challenges in one domain or another, has strengths and that these students need to be engaged through the meaningful integration of their interests and passions. Through the use of strength-based language and actions, students will begin to become engaged and intrinsically motivated in the learning process once again. While these beliefs are at the core of the strength-based mindset, they can also be used as the lens through which to view and interpret the following sections which will outline many of the key factors, strategies and practices that were identified by participants as they described their observations and experiences within schools embracing a strength-based approach to inclusionary education.

Throughout the Discovery Phase interviews, participants identified the important *role that leadership* and administration can play in promoting a shift towards a strength-based approach within their school's culture. The beliefs and practices put in place by the school administration have an impact on the school culture as a whole. Change can arise from educators following the direction and example provided by principals and vice-

principals, particularly in relation to the implementation of practices, programs, and models to enhance student learning. The schools that were identified by participants as having exemplary strength-based practices already in place held one very crucial element in common, the mindset and priorities of each school's administrative team. For strength-based practices to be implemented within an inclusionary school context, these concepts and practices must be promoted by those in leadership positions.

For a new approach to become embedded in everyday practice, indeed within the very fiber of a school's culture, the leadership in the building needs to prioritize this vision. Participants who had been, or continue to be, in leadership roles within the school system shared many of the approaches they had taken to ensure a strength-based method of operation within their schools. One participant shared that they had prioritized Educational Support Service Team (ESST) meetings saying: *"As a principal, for me, in my school it (my priority) was my ESS teams and how we treated the kids in our school. I wouldn't miss one ESS meeting."*

Leadership which prioritizes student learning, development, and wellbeing above all else provides fertile ground for a more strength-based approach for student learning to flourish. *"If you find great teachers, great schools, it's up to the leadership to elevate them."*

One of the necessary priorities of school leadership must include the promotion of strengths among students but also among their staff. One participant, a former principal, noted that there is often a competitive element within the field of education. Educators compare themselves to others and can sometimes *feel threatened* by those doing different

and wonderful things in their classrooms. It can be an isolating career with this type of mindset shared among staff.

> "*We have to learn to scale up good teaching. It just kind of happened. You have this individual and the fact that you call her a Unicorn (colleague who used strength-based practices innately) …Why don't we have a whole herd of them? It's because, in some ways, they're a threat to other teachers. She makes people look bad."*

Principals, vice-principals, and other educators holding leadership roles within inclusionary school contexts have the opportunity to first identify, and then leverage, the diverse strengths of the educators who make up their educational staff, allowing them to grow and flourish. This type of strength-based environment will only enhance the learning that occurs within the school's walls. *"If you have a school full of unicorns, can you imagine what you could do? Why don't we have a whole herd of them?"*

In continuing the discussion on the role that leaders within the public school system play, participants collectively stated the need for leaders to model autonomy support among their staff. Consistency in the pursuit of the vision of the school's culture is essential for whole staff buy-in and support. Participants in the study were consistent in their beliefs that leaders need to model the expected language, behaviours, and practices that they wanted to see among educators working and teaching students. *"We believe in you."*

> *"We believe that our kids are strong and we're going to work from their strengths. That means as a principal you do that with your teachers as well. You have to model it. You can't want that for the kids and when a teacher tries*

something new and wants to talk to you about it have another behavior."

Any new practice or program being implemented takes time to become successfully and impactfully embedded. Educators are often heard encouraging their students to *take risks* when learning a new skill or concept. Many of the strength-based practices identified in this initial phase of the research inquiry require, beyond a paradigm shift towards a more strength-based approach to inclusionary student learning, a shift away from traditional classroom practices to ones that are more conducive to promoting student strengths, interests, and inquiries. Educators need to feel free to implement new practices, knowing that they are fully supported by the leadership of their school, regardless of the initial outcomes.

Participants identified two distinct mindsets that currently exist within New Brunswick's inclusionary school system. While educators' goals are always to support student learning, the current deficit-based mindset recognized by participants holds a primarily support-oriented focus. For a strength-based mindset to become more prominent and integrated within our system, participants agreed that there needs to be a change within the system itself. *"How do you change a system?"* Within this section, the *process for change* as described by participants' perspectives is shared.

Participants described the importance that the role of school leadership plays in terms of establishing the culture within the school's learning environment. For a strength-based mindset and approach to teaching and learning to take hold, there needs to be a clear understanding of what that involves. This understanding provides the basis for a *shared vision* among all members of the school community. One participant described from their perspective how such a culture is established and sustained. They shared the

need for clarity among all staff in terms of the beliefs and priorities of the school. This is *"the way we do business,"* one participant said. Once this vision is firmly embedded, further efforts can then be put in place to shift practice.

While participants were, again, very clear on the important role of leadership within schools, they also acknowledged the importance of collaboration in the process of shifting mindsets within the school community. One participant acknowledged the tremendous wealth of skills and knowledge among the staff at their school, recognizing that the successes experienced within its walls was the result of hard work and dedication among their team of educators. *"It's not done in a vacuum. It's done with an amazing team of teachers."*

Participants shared that for authentic teamwork to occur effectively, the team must first be established. One participant, a former principal, shared many of the practices that were used to develop a cohesive team within their former school. The use of team-building games and activities, providing time within the professional staff meeting context for authentic communication to develop connections among colleagues, were among the strategies shared.

Another aspect that participants identified when describing the process of building a school community based on strengths was that of involving the community. Members of the community need to be invited into the schools to participate in student learning, contributing to that process by sharing their individual strengths, passions, and skills. *"To bring in strength-based you have to connect with your community as well. The community has assets. The community can assist you when you go out and do things."*

When changing a school's culture, participants offered the perspective that it is not only the students and staff who need understanding, connection, and collaboration, but also their families and the community as a whole. One participant noted that, particularly in small rural communities, *"the school is the heart of the community".* This participant wanted to convey the message that the school is not simply for the students but for their families as well. Both the review of current literature provided in the first chapter of this dissertation as well as the guiding questions for this research inquiry focused on practices used to engage learners. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging parents, guardians, and families as well. *"Parents are a child's first teacher. No one knows them better. How do we engage them?"* One participant answered this question through sharing their own experience of engaging and connecting with families by inviting them to be participants in the dialogue, sharing insights into their child's strengths and interests. Initiating this dialogue with a student's family can not only provide insights into the student's environment but also provide direction in how the school can better support or enhance each student's learning experience at school. Yet another participant communicated that parents need to be viewed as partners in the endeavour to educate and engage students within the inclusionary education system.

Participants placed an enormous amount of focus and energy on creating awareness among their school staff of the potential impacts and existence of strengths. Many participants shared different ways in which awareness could be created among their staff. One participant noted the various teambuilding activities that were used in their school to begin creating a school culture based on strengths. *"It needs to be the school culture."* Another mentioned the importance of incorporating *fun* into the process

through relatable visual representations of the journey through change and implementing dance parties at the beginning of staff meetings. Yet another participant shared the importance of having frequent check-ins with staff in an effort to support their understanding and respond to any questions that may arise as they began to shift their own mindset.

Part of establishing this school culture focusing on student strengths, according to the collective perspective of participants, is time. It was acknowledged that there is already a lack of time for teachers when it comes to general planning, preparation, and authentic meetings with colleagues. Before a strength-based approach can be implemented and become embedded within the culture of an inclusionary school: *"teachers need time to figure things out, to talk them out with their colleagues. They need the time to think about it, think it through, and make it their own. "*

Once educators have had time to apply their understanding of a strength-based approach to inclusionary education, participants identified the need to begin to apply certain strategies within their individual classrooms. *"You know what they are; now let's apply them".* So, they become action.

In considering the identified stages of change shown above, educators within the system can begin to unfold the understanding of their strength-based approach and how to meaningfully implement and integrate these processes within their individual classroom settings. One participant acknowledged that such a dramatic shift away from one's embedded practice, often outside of their comfort zones, can be difficult. To this end, all participants echoed the important role that mentoring and collaboration among

educators plays in facilitating this process, shifting awareness into understanding. *"Good systems are built on a huge amount of mentoring"*.

Participant interviews were conducted in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. On a global scale, many schools and departments faced mass shutdowns or adaptations necessary to continue their daily operations. Participants freely shared with excitement the numerous ways progress was being evidenced in regard to the promotion of a more strength-based approach to inclusionary education prior to the pandemic. While certain initiatives experienced a notable deceleration, participants remain as passionate and dedicated as ever to continue making gains in the area of promoting strengths to better meet the diverse needs of students within New Brunswick's schools, stating: *"We're not going to stop!"*

At this point in the research, there was no formalized discussion or conceptualization with participants regarding the proposal of a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education. Referencing the model of mental health and wellbeing proposed by Corey Keyes (Figure 8, p. 62), participants identified several practices evidencing the existence of a support-oriented dimension of inclusionary education. These examples included reference to practices and frameworks such as educational support service teams, integrated service delivery, response to intervention, and personalized or individualized learning plans. Exploration of the various components of the support-oriented model within New Brunswick schools was reviewed with participants who shared that, from their experiences, the primary focus, particularly with students experiencing challenges in learning and school life, remains within the support-oriented dimension that I have proposed.

Following individual participant interviews, one particularly active participant demonstrated by holding her arms in front of the computer screen to form two separate axes the potential existence of both a support-oriented and a strength-focused dimension. While acknowledging their individual existences they recognized that the two remain unintegrated. This visual prompted the creation of the diagram (Figure 19, p. 147) which was shared with all participants at the outset of the Dream Phase focus group. Reflecting on the work of Keyes in the area of mental health and wellbeing (Figure 8, p. 62), this diagram described the current model of inclusion as possessing both support-oriented strategies and strength-focused practices, but in a manner that is siloed and disconnected. Therefore, in the pictorial illustration of these two dimensions, they are depicted as being separate but coexisting. As we entered the Dream and Design phases of this research inquiry, this initial model became the frame for the promotion of applying integrated strength-based methods within inclusionary education settings. Within our focus group, this shared insight was referenced by participants as they described their visions of what inclusionary education could be, as well as how to begin creating or designing such a setting within the classrooms and schools of New Brunswick.

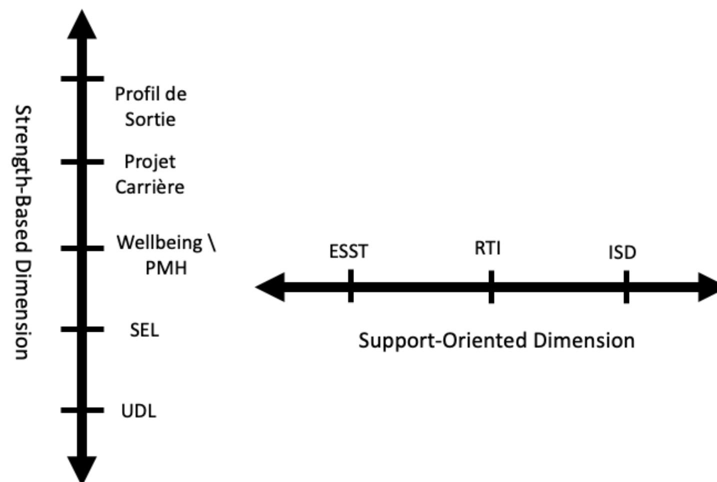
Practices that participants shared targeted student strengths and engagement, aligning with the principles of the conceptualized second dimension axis providing the environmental conditions necessary for students to flourish. Inclusionary education models such as Universal Design for Learning and components of positive mental health, social-emotional learning and the various global competencies were all examples of strength-based programming that participants were able to quickly identify without much reflection. Participants from the francophone sector of New Brunswick's education

system shared the *Projet de la vie et de carrière* and student *Profile de sortie* as examples of practices currently in place that propel students' existing strengths and leverage them to enhance their learning and hopes for the future.

While initial data at this stage of the research inquiry suggested the existence of two dimensions, participants confirmed that the strength-based dimension was only just beginning to emerge while the support-oriented approach to inclusionary education remains prominent.

Figure 19

Unintegrated dimensions



Summary and Reflections of Discovery Phase

The Discovery Phase of the research used individual participant interviews to explore the perspectives of educators regarding strength-based practices currently in place in classrooms and schools across New Brunswick within an inclusionary school system, providing the conditions necessary for students to flourish. Through the unanticipated description of participants various experiences with the introduction,

elaboration and implementation of various support structures, findings from this round of data collection in the Discovery Phase, properly contextualized New Brunswick's approach to inclusionary education and student support services.

Throughout the inductive content analysis of individual participant interview transcriptions, many key concepts in the areas of the application of strength-based practices within inclusionary education were uncovered. In particular, three main themes which identified areas of promise in relation to the pursuit of a strength-based approach to inclusionary education were explored: the *Role of Leadership, Emergent Strength-based Practices*, and the *Needed Process for Change*. The research questions, which were designed to elicit stories of educators' experiences and practices as they related to strength-based methods served their purpose.

The Dream Phase

Before initiating the second phase of the research endeavour, theme categories and associated subthemes which emerged in the Discovery Phase through the data analysis process were compiled into a summary document inclusive of the figures presented in the previous section. This document was reviewed with participants at the outset of the Dream Phase focus group. The presented theme categories and subthemes resonated with participants recollection of their individual interviews.

Building on the Discovery Phase, the Dream Phase data collection involved carrying out a focus group with participants who had completed the initial individual interviews. A total of seven participants consented and completed the focus group session via Zoom. This data collection event was approximately 70 minutes in duration. The intent of the Dream Phase was to invite participants to explore what their vision the

"*ideal future*" might be for integration of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom settings. Participants were asked to imagine, if they had a magic wand and without any systemic constraints, how they would begin creating the ideal inclusionary classroom or school setting that engaged strength-based approaches. As part of the line of inquiry, participants were asked to imagine and describe the nature of the roles of leadership, educators, and students within this ideal system and how they would each spend their time. In addition, the Dream Phase allowed participants to work collaboratively to reframe identified challenges and explore potential areas of innovation and application related to strength-based methods. The focus group session was digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed using inductive content analysis process and theme categories and subthemes were identified. Four theme categories emerged, each one encompassing a series of underlying subthemes. Each of these theme categories that emerged during the Dream Phase were closely linked with the final theme category and subthemes of the Discovery Phase. More specifically, theme categories associated with the Dream Phase appeared to represent an elaboration or expanded exploration and clarification of *Pursing a Strength-based Paradigm* and associated themes related to *Leadership, Educational Practices,* and the *Need for a Process for Change.* Table 3 provides a summary of the major theme categories and their respective subthemes themes that were identified as a result of the Dream Phase.

Table 3

Dream Phase Themes and Subthemes

Theme
Theme 1: ***The Role of Visionaries:*** *Autonomy Support; Culture of Visionaries; Practice of Modeling and Mentoring*
Theme 2: ***Guiding Strength-based Paradigm:*** *Application of Strength-Based Evidence; Belief in Student Strengths; Relationship-centered*
Theme 3: ***Envisioned Strength-based Practices:*** *Establishing Positive Connections; Providing Flexibility; Experience Learning Within and Beyond School; Student Voice and Choice; Modeling Strength-based Language; Strength Awareness; Shifting Learning Experiences of Students; Educators as Experts in Student Strengths; Educators as Guide, Coach and Collaborator*
Theme 4: ***Process for Change:*** *Engagement and Buy-in; Use of Strength-Based Language; Creation of Strength-aligned Curriculum and Personalized Learning Plans; Clarified Strength-based Resources and Methods; Allotted Time for Planning; Continuity of Learning Relationships*

Theme 1: The Role of Visionaries: *Autonomy Support; Culture of Visionaries; Practice of Modeling and Mentoring*

One of the first themes uncovered through the analysis of the transcribed data from the Dream Phase focus group was the distinction between the title of *visionaries* and *leaders.* One participant noted that in the summary of the Discovery Phase, the theme *Role of Leadership* implied only those who were members of school administration teams. Various participants indicated that the notion of *leader* should be broader in the context of this research and in addressing the promotion of strength-based practices within inclusionary educational environments. Leaders could encompass a range of school staff members inclusive of educators, student services personnel, and even student who might play a pivotal role in promoting a strength-based paradigm or mindset in their respective educational settings. The idea of waiting for administrators alone to take action

related to promoting strength-based approaches was challenged through posing such questions as: *"Do we have to wait for a leader?" "If there's no leader does that mean change can't be accomplished?" "Am I a leader?" "Are you ready to be a leader?"* As an extension to the discussions held during the Discovery Phase interviews, one participant shared that their role as school principal included creating a culture that enabled all stakeholders to take on a leadership role within their areas of strength and expertise. Principals, classroom teachers and students all have the capacity to be leaders. Participants collectively asserted that the term *visionary* was more accurate and impactful than *leaders* in describing potential agents of change related to promoting strength-based perspectives and practices within inclusionary educational settings.

Through the lens of the newly established definition of visionaries, participants were able to more clearly identify the critical aspects necessary to allow educators to begin implementing certain strength-based concepts and practices. *"We're all visionaries!"* There was a clear voice among participants urging for a more collaborative relationship between school administration that was less *controlling* and reflected a more structured approach to providing *autonomy support*.

Several participants who had, throughout their careers in education, held roles as school principals acknowledged the important roles teachers play in implementing new practices within their classes which can ultimately shift the culture of a school. *"Teachers change schools."* Participants agreed collectively that teachers and school administration need to work collectively, feeling that they have the autonomy to implement new strength-based approaches and processes within their classroom without fear of reproach,

knowing that they are fully supported within their school by both the administration and their colleagues.

The very notion of establishing a school culture which embraces both the support-oriented and strength-focused dimensions of inclusionary education signals the need of a supportive environment that encourages and bolsters members to become visionaries in support of the collective school vision. The creation of a *culture of visionaries*, then, is one that fosters this skill and confidence among all members of its community. Participants listed the various beliefs and practices established within their respective schools that promoted the development of a *culture of visionaries*. One participant acknowledged that administration, teachers, and students alike could be visionaries within their schools; while another participant spoke of their priority, as a school principal, in fostering an environment where leaders could emerge or develop. Another participant shared the imperative process of identifying individual strengths among educational staff, so that they can feel empowered to join the team of visionaries in a meaningful way. *"It's getting your teachers to find their strengths, to build on their strengths, to build their competent team so that when shit does hit the wall or there's reasons to celebrate, they're all in it together."*

Participants were passionate about the importance of *coaching and mentoring* among staff and colleagues. Having acknowledged that visionaries consist of educators and learners and are not limited to members of a school's administration, they offer a perspective that could be shared among others in the staff still attempting to adopt a more strength-based approach and mindset to inclusive education. For the dream of an integrated and embedded dimension of inclusionary education, consisting of strength-

based practices that positively impact student learning and provide an environment conducive to flourishing, a collective vision needs to be established, understood, and embraced. Administration can support this practice by promoting and supporting coaching and mentoring among their educational teams. One participant shared that this is the role that school administration must understand and implement consistently.

Theme 2: Guiding Strength-based Paradigm: *Application of Strength-Based Evidence; Belief in Student Strengths; Relationship-Centered*

In envisioning the necessary processes and structures that would be necessary to begin shifting paradigms related to a greater use of strengths within inclusionary educational practices, participants referred to various *evidence-based models* that may serve to guide the application of strengths. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks were given as examples of strength-based models currently being applied in schools. One participant spoke of the effectiveness of SEL practices in terms of its benefits in "*cultivating …healthy relationships and preparing…young people to learn."*

Other applications of strength-based practices shared by participants included inquiry and project-based learning as effective means for engaging student learning while activating their areas of interest and strengths. One participant also contended that outdoor educations models, can shift the "*practical and pragmatic"* aspects of learning to the something more personally meaningful or *spiritual,* allowing students *"to connect emotionally to their learning."* Another participant shared that some secondary schools are reinstating more hands-on curriculum inclusive of trades and the arts, providing expanded opportunities for a wider range of students to connect more meaningfully with their areas of strength or interest.

Throughout the focus group discussions, participants collectively spoke of the strength-based applications of the Global Competencies framework. One participant shared that *"having "real-life issues… where students are in it to problem solve"* adds relevance and meaning to their learning. Various participants highlighted the *Profil de sortie* (Global Competencies Profile) as well as the P*rojet de vie et de carrière* (Life or Career Project/Portfolio*)* from the Francophone sector as embedded initiatives focusing on the social-emotional, cognitive, and communicative domains related to personal development. Similarly, another participant spoke of workplace or coop programs made available to high school students as a means of exploring and applying strengths within potential career options, seeing *"hope for their future."*

Participants asserted that strength-based frameworks should be evidence-based and should also be accompanied by educator attitudes and *beliefs that all students have strengths* that can be applied in the context of their learning. This collective participant conviction was evident through such statements as *"I've never met a kid that's not good at something"* and "*students naturally gravitate towards their strengths."* Participants' deliberations affirmed that many students who have become disengaged from learning often do not possess a personalized "*sense of strength awareness*"; in other words, what their strengths are or how to begin exploring them. Within an ideal inclusive educational system, participants envisioned a community of educators who not only believe in the strengths of their students, but also intentionally serve as guides or mentors for them in exploring their interests and passions, or even facilitators in uncovering or discovering hidden or latent strengths.

Participants acknowledged that the model of inclusive education has grown and evolved over time to provide a more all-encompassing view of who should be included, and how. *"When we talk about inclusion it's not just talking about disabilities anymore. We have a much broader definition, a much more holistic approach."*

This broadened definition of inclusion represents an opportunity for the proposed strength-oriented dimension to take hold, allowing educators to become experts on the subject of student strengths, promoting their individual growth, learning and personal development.

In discussing the importance of applying strength-based frameworks and believing in students' strengths, participants identified the need for developing positive and healthy connections with students. Such qualities of educator-student relationships provide the basis for exploring and gaining a greater understanding of students' respective gifts, areas of interest and passion. In this regard, r*elationship-centered* strategies were viewed as prerequisite for engaging and supporting the use of strength-based educational methods. As several participant deliberated, educators that *"invest"* in student relationships are those who "*respect and value them as part of the learning community*", promoting their *sense of belonging,* or inclusion. Participants concurred that this *sense of relatedness* was at the heart of establishing a positive learning environment within inclusionary schools and classrooms. During the Dream Phase focus group participants agreed that each student needs to have at least one adult within the school with whom they connect.

Theme 3: Envisioned Strength-based Practices: *Establishing Positive Connections; Providing Flexibility; Student Voice and Choice; Modeling Strength-based Language; Strength Awareness; Altering Learning Experiences of Students; Educators as Experts in Student Strengths; Educators as Guide, Coach and Collaborator*

The Dream Phase areas of inquiry invited participants to reflect upon and envision what strength-based interactions, processes or practices might be evident within a dual dimensional view of inclusionary education. Nine key practice themes emerged related to envisioned or ideal approaches focusing on the application of strength-based methods.

The first practice theme viewed the *establishment of positive connections* with students as essential. As one participant indicated "*You need to know each of your students well. You have to know them to know where they are at."* Another participant highlighted that such relationships can begin to be established by asking questions and showing genuine curiosity regarding students' lives and interests. Practices for fostering positive connections or a sense of relatedness include using a student's name and making eye contact when greeting them each morning and ensuring there is a place for each student within the classroom whether this be by having their name on the door or ensuring there is a seat for them. In addition, the creation of positive connections among colleagues was emphasized as a critical consideration when *dreaming* of an ideal dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education.

One of the most impactful practices that came forward in the Dream Phase focus group was the notion of *providing increased flexibility* within the constructs of the school day or classroom structures, allowing for multiple opportunities for more meaningful and engaging learning to occur. Participants viewed the application of flexibility in multiple ways. While some participants affirmed the importance of educators *providing flexibility* within daily classroom lessons, others felt that greater flexibility could be considered in terms of the overall structure or daily format of schools' daily operations. A third perspective involved incorporating a great range of real-life experiences beyond the

classroom drawing upon varied environments reflective of students' interests. As one participant indicated "*You (educators) need to be able to listen to students and adjust to guide your teaching.*"

In speaking to the need for flexibility to promote increased student engagement in learning, participants identified the immense amount of planning and preparation that is put into daily lessons. While important to prepare and follow a lesson plan to ensure student learning according to prescribed and targeted curriculum outcomes, participants also stressed that educators need to be adaptable to varied learning situations and *"go off track to take advantage of those authentic teachable moments"*.

Participants shared their beliefs that educators need to be able to pursue areas of interest for students when they arise to promote student engagement and foster a desire for learning.

> *"When you ask people: What do you need to learn in school in order to be a functional adult who works well in society and community? You know you need to be good at social relationships. When you look at what we teach in school. What's the minimum that we need to learn? You know, in math and reading and writing? Everything after that…that personal development part of building a person and who you're going to become."*

From a more structural perspective, administrators and educators could alter the structure of the school's day-to-day functioning to one that was less restrictive, allowing student learning to be the primary focus. One participant shared a practical example of this by saying: *"I don't have bells in my school, and it works. Every kids got a cell phone. They know what time it is and when to get to class."*

Another participant, building on the preceding statement, imagined the possibility of a more "*fluid school day*", one built on and evolving out of students' interests and passions resulting in multiple pathways to learning.

Other participants viewed the practice of educator flexibility from a different vantage point, expressing the need to be flexible within the curriculum content itself. Throughout the Discovery and Dream Phases, participants expressed the notion that the curriculum is a resource for educators which serves as a guide for their planning and instruction. During the Dream Phase focus group, several participants elaborated on this notion by stating that educators, or indeed the whole education system, should examine the curriculum in light of global educational competencies, assessing essential content or skills that students need to embrace in order to meaningfully contribute and participate within their communities as adults. One participant expanded this notion to state that educators have a professional responsibility to their students to provide them with educational experiences beyond academics that will promote their holistic personal development, taking into account their social-emotional and global competency development as well.

> *"Right now, we have a lot of standards … we have to attend to the curriculum to get marks. Yet sometimes we're not strength-based in working within those standards. If we realigned some of those things, you might have more engagement with our learners".*

One of the practices identified by participants when envisioning the ideal inclusionary education setting was promoting autonomy among learners. Participants identified the need for students to feel a sense of empowerment and control over their

own learning. The two main practices that came out through the analysis of collected data were that of providing students with *voice* and with *choice.*

When discussing the development of individualized and personalized learning plans for students experiencing challenges in areas of their learning, participants noted that allowing students to participate and have their voices heard throughout the process was a powerful practice that would ultimately increase their engagement, motivation, and *buy-in.*

Likewise, providing students with *voice* can also serve to find solutions in areas other than academics where students may be experiencing difficulty. Equally as important as providing students with a voice is having educators and other adults within their learning setting who are willing and able to listen. As one participant reinforced: *"Whatever the context, you listen to the kids."* Another participant, whose area of strength included guidance, voiced that students who behave in certain ways do so for a reason and that there is always a *root* or function to their behaviour. Providing *voice* to students gives insight to their reason for their response, and *choice* may play an important part in altering or adapting their learning environment and experience with school.

Participants also reinforced the perspective that part of fostering a culture based on strength-based methods involved the adoption and modeling of *strength-based language*. They identified that within our current structures, many of the policies and procedures, much like our support-oriented approaches, are deficit-focused. One participant referenced policies around student expulsion as not being strength oriented. These are policies that educators, regardless of their mindset, are obligated to follow. By

adopting language that promotes positivity, solutions, and strengths, change can begin to take root.

Beyond the wording of official departmental and district documents, the language being employed within the classroom and the halls of a school can set the tone for the type of culture and learning environment that is being promoted. Participants identified the lack of consideration and application of strengths and strength-based language when developing and implementing individualized or personalized learning plans. One participant reflected on the fact that the focus continues to remain on the challenges that students are experiencing, rather than on their abilities, areas of success or achievement. For example, the words *gap* or *reducing the gap* reinforce the overarching deficits without mention of existing positive potential or sources of motivation that are linked with strengths or potential.

In contrast, participants emphasized that when students are surrounded by strength-based language, especially when modeled by the educators, they begin to internalize the messages they are hearing, *"seeing themselves within their learning,"* and begin to express themselves and describe their learning through the use of this same strength-based language.

> *"We have the essential skills program and essential skills for the workplace program. You basically work on 'OK what can you do? What is your strength? Let's find the exact spot where you're at and then we're going to add on to that.' So, they are succeeding!"*

Strength-based language requires first an *awareness of individuals' existing strengths*. Participants shared that educators and students alike need to be able to explore

their areas of interest to subsequently discover the nature and quality of their strengths. One participant noted that once you identify a student's interest, that is your *hook.* You can then begin to engage them more authentically in their learning: *"Observe that if they love 'that' (a certain topic) … you dive into it."*

While participants discussed the reality that many students are not aware of their strengths or interests, students will *"naturally gravitate towards their strengths*". This increases students' authentic engagement that can then be leveraged to address other aspects of learning. *"How do we create learning environments that they can be actively engaged in?"*

Participants highlighted the concern that current structures in place within the education system are not always conducive to the promotion of inclusionary learning environments that meet the engagement needs of students. Throughout the Dream Phase focus group, participants developed a vision of a system where strengths were at the forefront of all planning and decision-making processes. In sharing practices to support this vision, *altering the learning experiences of students* was discussed in terms of developing or gearing learning strategies towards individual student life experiences and interests. One participant indicated that such efforts may be especially relevant for students with emotional and behavioural concerns. Inclusion of their strengths within their educational experiences may serve not only to reduce anxiety or stress associated with areas of challenge, but also increase their engagement and hope for being successful.

To conclude their reflections related to the application of strength-based methods within inclusionary schools, participants were asked to envision what the ideal learning environment might look like: "*What would we see?" "What would we hear?"* One

participant’s response that received collective affirmation from their peers was as follows:

> *“I would hear noise. Students would arrive at school and hear about somebody working on this or that project and say ‘I find that absolutely fascinating. Can I work with them?’ It's not the class that is working on that, it's a group of people who are working on that. I could be with them. I could be with them for two hours and there's maybe two teachers in that group. Students would be actively engaged, but it would be noisy.”*

When student strengths are at the center of educators’ professional planning and practice, there is a markable shift in their performance. It is paramount that educators not only identify student strengths but also provide students with opportunities to explore their own interests and to uncover their unknown strengths for themselves. As participants emphasized in their exchanges: “*Educators would then become experts in the strengths of their students”* as well as the in the *look-fors* in potential learning activities that linked with students interests or sources of motivation. Being experts in students’ strengths has the potential to bring innovation and variety to the learning process. *“Planning is a non-linear chaotic process. It's not ABC. It's ADFZ. You're basing your lesson on the kids today. Sometimes that week depending on their life circumstances and their strengths.”*

> *“We’re very fast in identifying students and then going straight to them giving them services, which is fine. We want to prevent further difficulties down the road. But we just need to take a little moment to analyze (information about the student) a little bit and work as a team with the learner.”*

The potential role of educators as being experts in students' strengths would also subsequently shift their instructional approaches. This, in turn, would also change the role of students in the learning process. Within such a shift in practice, participants envisioned students taking on a more active learner role while educators would need to adapt their instructional practices to be less of a directive or telling approach, and to become more like a *guide, mentor,* or even *collaborator*. One participant highlighted this would mean: "*Students…spending a lot more time being active and the teacher…not spending so much time in front of them explaining, saying, repeating."*

The role of educators as collaborators was not only emphasized in terms of working with active student learners, but also with other educators in terms of their combined strengths to elaborate innovative approaches for learning. Similarly, collaboration with parents and family members was identified as a beneficial source of information about student strengths and methods of engagement to support instructional planning and the design of learning activities for students. The use of student strengths to shape educational planning for learning seemed to reaffirm for participants their central beliefs about students, in that, *"all are unique", "all learn in a variety of ways"* and that *"there are many different learning styles among students"*.

Theme 4: Process for Change*: Engagement and Buy-in; Use of Strength-Based Language; Creation of Strength-aligned Curriculum and Personal Learning Plans; Clarified Strength-based Resources and Methods; Allotted Time for Planning; Continuity of Learning Relationships*

Participants recognized that change can be difficult in part because people often experience a sense of grief or loss during times of transition. As one participant expressed,

"People are always letting go of something with change." To this end, there needs to be a degree of sensitivity, allowing time for individuals to process and internalize newly presented ideas or ways of doing things, even in terms of the process of embracing new perspectives about the application strength-based methods. There was general census among participants that effective and sustainable change does not come in the form of a mandate. Rather, educators need to understand and believe in the change that is being promoted.

Participants shared the importance of having clear, open, and honest communication among staff and colleagues related to the process of change, whether this be at the school, district, or departmental levels. This means "*Keeping people informed about why we're changing, what we're trying to change, and why it's better"*. Effective communication is essential for having "*educators actively engaged"* and committed to changes in perspectives and practices within their respective educational contexts, demonstrating complete *buy-in.* As one participant emphasized strongly*, "You have to have people on board".* The need for effective communication and buy-in was also discussed in terms of members of the community and ensuring their understanding of newly established priorities and proposed vision of the school culture related to the application of strengths. *"Community stakeholders, whether it's the parents, post-secondary (institutions), funding partners, district office, they all need to understand the vision that you're trying to create with your school and your kids."*

Buy-in comes when there is open communication and clear explanations of the changes being made to promote schools' vision for use of students' strengths. Participants agreed that clarity and transparency are critical element of explaining the

process of change within educational settings, as well as in describing the benefits and enhancements of these changes for learners.

When dreaming of potential ways or means to facilitate change in terms of incorporating a greater emphasis on strength-based methods, participants once again highlighted the *use of strength-based language* as a key element in the process for change. Given the prominence of deficit-based wording or language within written programs and personalized learning plans, participants asserted the importance of placing greater emphasis on written language that conveys belief in students' strengths, interests and potential and how to engage meaningfully in the learning process. Ideally, strength-based language, both written and oral would be used, heard, and modelled throughout the school environment by all staff members.

Another consideration related to promoting or moving toward a greater emphasis on strengths included the development of a *strength-aligned curriculum* that outlines flexible formats and methods for learning that encourage and support educators in designing learning approaches that reflect the unique strengths, interests, and preference of student. One participant indicated that the promotion of strength-aligned curriculum would place emphasis not only on the acquisition of essential content or knowledge, but also the means for engaging students actively as learners. Participants agreed that the curriculum needs to be a document to guide student learning in a way that promotes engagement and fosters a love of learning.

Participants added to their vision of change within the current curriculum to include elements they would like to see altered within personalized learning plans that are prepared for students experiencing learning challenges. While current learning plans

include sections which address students' areas of strength, one participant noted that these strengths are rarely included, elaborated upon, or incorporated when developing learning interventions within collaborative planning process. This participant further shared their belief in the importance of students' strength by stating: *"The PLP plans need to have an objective based on strengths… students to be able to say what they're good at."*

In envisioning an inclusionary education system that embraces strength perspectives and practices, participants spoke of the value of creating and having access to *strength-aligned documents and methods.* Such resources would not only address the use of strength-based method and more personalized approaches for learning, but also impact the ways in which we gather information or data to related to monitoring and reporting student progress. While acknowledging the recent shift and emphasis related to the use of formative assessment methods, participants highlighted that standardized forms of evaluation such as provincial assessments, as well as the format of reporting tools such as provincial report cards, are not consistent with the strength-based methods being envisioned within participants deliberations. As one participant noted *"Evaluations, provincial examinations or tests need to reflect more of the progress being made by each student across time."* With respect to strengths-focused evaluation methods, participants placed envisioned the development of assessment tools and methods that would following students individual learning progress on a continuum highlighting milestones of accomplishment or success.

Participants all agreed that one of the principal factors contributing to the process for change was providing *prioritized time for educators*. *"Time is one of those keywords*

too. It's the time to do it. You have to have time carved out every day." Participants acknowledged that educators, particularly those in the context of the classroom, already report experiencing a lack of time for preparation and planning. Quite often the collaborative aspects of professional development are not prioritized as teachers try to "*keep up"* and "*get ready for the next day".* When given the freedom to dream without restrictions, participants identified the need for educators to be provided with time to discuss and understand the notion of a strength-based paradigm, and how to personalize learning approached for students through the incorporation of their strengths. Allotted time would provide educators with increased opportunities for professional collaboration among colleagues in the creation of common plans and implementation strategies methods for applying strengths within their classroom and school environments. As echoed by numerous participants: *"I would see a lot of the adults in the building having more time to discuss, to work out their preconceptions, to work through their practice."*

Finally, participants voiced the importance of *continuity of learning relationships* in supporting the process of moving towards a great emphasis on application student strengths in the school context. Throughout the Dream Phase participants highlighted the imperative of establishing meaningful connections with students to understand their strengths and foster their engagement. To this end, several participants indicated the advantage of educators having the opportunity to work with students for more than one school year. This would allow students to continue learning through the development of their strengths as well as allow educators to follow and track their progress and achievement.

"You need to be with the students for more than just one year. If you do just one

year, you don't get to know them well enough. You can't really define what their strengths are and what their interests are. So, you need to be with them for more than one year so that you can help them move along… progress."

The majority of a student's day is spent in school. Participants acknowledged that many educators will naturally connect with their students, asking questions about their lives and learning about their areas of interest. According to one participant, the challenge that often arises is that by the time a trusting and respectful connection has been established with students and they begin to make progress in their learning and development, the school year has come to an end. Students and teachers must both start all over again in the fall with someone new. In response to this reality, participants envisioned the positive aspects associated with having educators teach the same group of students, or certain students, for more than one year. Such benefits included enhancing students' awareness of their personal strengths, fostering a positive view of self and their potential, and strengthening their confidence for undertaking new learning tasks.

Summary and Reflections of Dream Phase

The Dream Phase of the research used focus group discussions, guided by targeted research questions, to explore and envision potential practices and structures that would be in place and observable within a more intentional and integrated dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education, consisting of both student support services as well as identified and applied individual strengths and interests in the context of student learning.

Throughout the inductive content analysis of the transcribed focus group discussion, four key theme-categories emerged: *The Role of Visionaries; Strength-based*

Paradigm; Envisioned Strength-based Practices; Process for Change, each consisting of their respective subthemes, which provided initial structures and a potential direction for the envisioned pursuit of a strength-based paradigm and approach to inclusionary education.

The Design Phase

At the outset of the Design Phase theme categories and associated subthemes which emerged in the preceding phase were presented in a summary document, reviewed with participants. There was consensus that the summarized theme categories and subthemes reflected the discussions and insights that arose during the Dream phase. The Dream Phase summary provided a starting point from which to explore and conceive foundational elements for proposing or structuring a practical vision for the potential realization of a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education where strength-based methods and practices would be implemented and embedded in daily classroom and school-based practice. This entailed
exploring various propositions for amplifying and embedding the application of strength-based practices and processes that were conceptualized during the Dream Phase focus group discussion

Consistent with the areas of inquiry associated with the Design Phase, participants were asked to explore how traditional roles of educators, students and other partners might change, or evolve in moving forward towards the realization of the dream discussion visions that were illuminated during the last phase. In addition, they were invited to reflect on and share their insights related to educator readiness and potential strategic directions (plans, actions, or processes) that would be essential for moving

forward towards the realization of such a vision. The analysis of the Design Phase rendered four theme categories. These themes are outlined in the following table and are described in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

Table 4

Design Phase Priority Actions

Theme 1: ***Shift in Paradigm***
Theme 2: ***Letting Go of the Curriculum-centric Focus***
Theme 3: ***Process for Deep Change:*** *System-Wide Change; Shared Educator Vision, Stories of Success (Unicorn Tales); Journey of Accompaniment*
Theme 4: ***Collaborative and Creative Actions:*** *Communicate; Co-Create*

Theme 1: Shift in Paradigm

In envisioning the role of educators, participants recapped and referred back to the Dream Phase's discussion that reflected shifts in educator roles related to being guides, mentors, coaches, and collaborators with students within a more strength-based approach to inclusionary classrooms and schools. As one participant asserted: *"the teacher is still a teacher but the way they go about it might be different because of the way they look at students."*

Shifting roles also included the elaboration of team approaches encompassing collaborative interactions with other educators, family members and community partners. Participants emphasized the importance of have educators *"work as a team with the learner"* engaging in "*collaboration within the school*."

These interactions were envisioned within the adoption of more flexible learning formats that engaged students in the application of strength-based methods within positive

learning environments and relationships. One participant envisioned that *"for this (flexibility) to happen the teacher has to, not 'let go' but accept that they will accompany each student."*

Shifts in roles was viewed as largely coinciding with individual shifts in thinking, belief or paradigm related to the relevance and importance of strength-based practices and perspectives within their daily educational practices and routines. Such shifts in paradigm were describe as not "*surface changes*", but "*profound ones*".

> *"It's not surface changes. It's profound changes. The only way you can change a person's beliefs, their behaviour, is to create an accompanying relationship with that back and forth. This reciprocity. It's this path there that makes the changes go deep."*

Participants shared that the process of deepening a paradigm requires educators within the system to navigate their preconceived beliefs and traditional ways of practice to understand the new paradigm that is being presented. One participant highlighted that it is not a matter of simply implementing new practices or strategies within individual classrooms or school contexts; rather, it requires educators fully embracing the mindset of strength-based approaches, recognizing the enhancements that they provide to enhance student learning and their personal development. Participants noted that envisioning new roles within such a model would render a *"holistic approach to education"* drawing on aspects of each student as a unique person inclusive of their strengths, gifts, interests, and passions. Such efforts would take time and conceivably not involve immediate shifts in roles, but transformations or "*changes in mindset around them."*

Theme 2: Letting Go of Curriculum Centric Focus

Participants were invited to share their perspectives related to what considerations would be critical for creating readiness among educators to embrace dual dimensional approach to inclusionary education, a paradigm one with intentional focus on the application of strength-bases methods. One of the shifts highlighted by participants that must occur for there to be a deepening of a proposed strength-based paradigm is the notion of the curriculum not being at the centre of professional practice and academic instruction. Participants acknowledged the key role that the curriculum plays in guiding educator planning, preparation, and instruction, but placed emphasis on the importance of having students being at the centre or the central focus of all learning experiences. As one individual asserted: *"It's not just about the curriculum. It's about that whole child. The curriculum is just a vessel."*

While the current system still has many structures in place for professional accountability and student learning expectations, educators need to be provided the professional autonomy to be able to guide student learning based on their identified interests and interests.

> *"Help teachers see that the focus that's on the curriculum needs to be shifted a little bit to be on the learner. You still need the curriculum to guide your practice but it's about moving from comparing the students to the outcomes in the curriculum to seeing how each student develops in their own way and embracing that."*

Participants affirmed that it is a wide-spread belief or value among educators that all students are unique, learning in their own style, pace, and rhythm. Participants voiced that our practices as a system still does not reflect this belief. The curriculum provides a

guide, outlining the essential learning outcomes that are students are attain, and is often used as basis for determining who is meeting or not meeting expected standards. Without students at the centre, those who struggle to succeed may become known in terms of their deficits, with strengths being unexplained or omitted all together. Without inclusion of strength key aspects of the learning process such as engagement, intrinsic motivation and even well-being never enter curricular discussions related to student learning

Theme 3: Process for Deep Change: *System-Wide Change; Shared Educator Vision, Stories of Success (Unicorn Tales); Journey of Accompaniment*

Moving beyond the individual shift in mindset required by individual educators to embrace the paradigm of strengths, participants highlighted that the process for change, deep sustainable change, needs to occur on a much larger scale. *"It's about schoolwide, systemic change. That takes time."* One participant shared that educators may embrace a strength-based paradigm *as an island* or *in isolation*, but it is not the most effective way to promote wide-spread changes across schools or districts. For a strength-based culture to take root, there needs to be a collective vision and dedication to the promotion of strength-based perspectives and practices. Participants stressed that this type of deep systemic change takes time, and it is critical educators and educational stakeholders are effectively prepared to engage and implement approaches and strategies that result in a change or shift in school culture that supports the application of strength-based methods. One participant who had some experience in training educators on strength-based applications stated:

> *"It's not so much training. it's more about providing opportunities. People in the districts had several training sessions or times of reflection (referring to strength-*

based approaches). I would say it was more than training. It was moments where it was possible to think together, see things, even dream together."

Awareness and understanding of strengths were mentioned frequently over the course of the three phases of research. Participants recognized that often within the field of education awareness and understanding is often promoted through professional development activities. Participants working within the francophone sector Education shared their experiences methods related to promoting shifts in mindset and practices related to strength-based approaches. Using *time* effectively during professional learning activities provided educators with opportunities for reflecting, discussing, and collaborating with their peers on the operationalization of strength-based methods from a collective point of view or perspective. This group of participants spoke favourably, highlighting the benefits of working as a collective or cohesive team. The process of collaboration with educators in shifting paradigm was viewed as beneficial in terms of "*teachers developing their own strengths*" and *shared vision* in lieu of driving people to make changes based on presentation of solely empirical evidence or convincing arguments. The development of shared vision was having a clear understanding of students' strengths and possessing the belief that they make a positive significant difference in the lives of students and in the shaping their learning experiences.

"The educators in the building need to have a really clear understanding of why they need this. Why it's important. Why it makes a difference in those young people's lives. How this approach can really change the landscape and make things more equitable. It's about selling that "why" and having the success stories."

Such shared perspectives convey a value for knowing students' unique strengths and empowering educators to identify and activate them in the context of the learning process. Therefore, a shared paradigm related to strength-based methods should be embraced not only by educator, but also educational leaders who support the autonomy of educators to seek out and engage students' strengths as a key focus and priority in inclusive education.

Participants shared that having a *shared vision* of the changes being promoted within a school or education systems would engage educators in building a clear understanding of *"why these changes are being promoted"* and *"how they will positively impact daily practice and overall student learning and development"*.

One participant provided the following example of a strength-based vision which had been adopted by their school, *"We believe that our kids are strong and we're going to work from their strengths."* Participants emphasized the need for clarity and consistency of messaging associated shared strength-based visions, fostering not only understanding an understanding of strength-based perspectives, but also that student strengths and strength-focused practices are an expected and non-negotiable part of the learning process. The commitment to this kind of vision facilitates a unified approach among stakeholders and a dedicated professional practice focus for pursuing systemic change. As one participants emphasized: *"The teachers need to feel that you can't mess with that. So those strength-based practices then, it's not just applied to students. It applies to staff as well."*

Stories of Success: Unicorn Tales. *"I feel indebted to and blessed by two unicorn teachers whose natural abilities to focus on students' strengths and engage their*

interests undoubtedly changed the course of my own children's journey of learning" (MDG)

Participants shared that hearing stories from other teachers of their successful implementation of strength-based approaches and practices can be one of the most impactful tools in promoting a shared vision of strengths and facilitating deep change in the way we think about and plan for student learning. Having early adopters, those who may have been inherently implementing strength-based practices early in their professional experiences and further developing over time can be very engaging and encouraging for their colleagues. It is encouraging and inspiriting to have practical examples of *"this strength thing"* can be accomplished well, as to hear about the positive impact it has had on students in terms of both their personal development and learning. One participant made reference to the magical quality of one peer's application of strength-based practices in the classroom. *"We never really understood what she was doing but "Wow!". Whatever it was it really caught your eye. When you take the time to ask what colleagues are doing… It's this personalized strength-based kind of teaching."*

Any change, involving something new and unfamiliar, can seem daunting and anxiety provoking at first. Participants shared that having teacher models or champions, referred to by various as unicorn teachers, creates a great sense of ease and possibility for embracing something new that is already in motion, something that really can be emulated. Another participant asserted that a hearing about the successes experienced by both educators and students in relation to strengths provides the necessary encouragement and motivation for others to begin the journey for themselves. *"Success stories! Really important! It's engaging to see what others do."*

In addition to embracing a shared vision for strengths and embracing educator stories of success, participants emphasized the need for having encouragement from others as initial steps are taken towards integration of strength perspectives within instructional practices and student learning. Such encouragement was described in terms of having the presence of collegial support manifested in a way that reflected a relationship of *accompaniment* or *coming alongside* during the process of change. As one participant shared, *"we must be there to listen, then accompany. It's the accompaniment that we need."* The role of a school visionary in this regard was highlighted as essential. While certain structures need to be implemented and processes facilitated to allow for the journey to begin, *visionaries* within the inclusionary education system need to be in place to respond to the initial questions and concerns of their colleagues, serving as a guide as they work through this process and accompany each other as well as their students and families throughout this journey of embracing more intentionally strength-based perspectives and practices.

Participants collectively agreed that change is accomplished through *doing*. They also highlighted that educator' openness and confidence to undertake and apply new ways of thinking related to professional practice is fostered when educators feel that they have a degree of autonomy to implement practices in a way that fits their style of teaching and know that they will be supported by school and district leaders. participants. Participants preferred to use the expression *journey* over *process* of change given its emphasis on more relational and collaborative interactions in progressing towards a dual dimensional model of inclusionary education, inclusive of a renewed focus on and elaboration of strength-based methods.

Theme 4: Collaborative and Creative Actions: *Communicate; Co-Create*

In designing the necessary processes and structures to begin implementing aspects of this second-dimension into inclusionary education practice, *communication* throughout the entire journey was emphasized repeatedly by all participants. Clearly *communicating the vision*, the various processes, as well as the stories of trial and triumph are essential to the success of this endeavour. One participant shared that having: *"a really clear communication plan throughout everything needs to be part of that too. To share those best practices and also the successes that are happening, and the difference they are making."*

Another participant highlighted the value of clear communication in their assertion that to educators and school staff need to:

> *"have discussions together. That is how we will build our understanding. How we engage. It's going to succeed. Already there are changes that we see. It's in our approach. It's like your model. There is much more than talking about the interests and strengths. It's a way to work together."*

Participants articulated that, beyond having a clearly communicated vision of change, time for professional collaboration and dialogue needed to be prioritized within the structure of daily school scheduling. Together, through communication and the negotiation of various perspectives, educators are better able to *co-create* meaning and understanding of the suggested strength-based paradigm, successfully shifting toward a mindset conducive to the implementation and integration of such concepts and approaches.

While much of the strength-based concepts and practices comprise a personalized element, participants acknowledged that certain foundational structures and milestones need to be established to ensure that the vision is being carried through, progress is being tracked and successes are being recorded. *"There does have to be those data points as well that you're looking for. So, how do you know that you're being successful?"*

While participants did not offer specific or concrete suggestions of the types of data points that could be used for this part of the journey, they did share that these data points should contain an element of fluidity and flexibility, allowing variety between schools to match their population, practices, and overall school culture.

Summary and Reflections of Design Phase

The Design Phase of this research endeavour illuminated several actions that need to be prioritized in order to begin shifting inclusionary education system and practices towards a more strength-based approach. Most notably, inductive content analysis of the transcribed focus group discussion highlighted that these actions consisted primarily of: *Shift in Paradigm; Letting Go of the Curriculum-centric Focus*; having a clearly communicated and developed *Process for Deep Change*; and opportunities for educators to communicate and co-create the required *Restructuring Actions*. These theme categories provided the initial structures and potential direction for the envisioned pursuit of a strength-based paradigm and integrated approach to inclusionary education to become actionable. The final phase of the Appreciative Inquiry research design, the Destiny Phase, will be addressed in the final Discussion chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter Four: Discussion

Overview of Discussion Chapter

The intent of this research was to investigate specific strength-based concepts and practices necessary for supporting a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education that encompasses both support-oriented methods and the promotion of flourishing for all students. The participatory research design and methods of this investigation applied a strength-based lens consistent with the underpinnings of Positive Psychology theoretical perspectives inclusive of the Seligman's (2011) PERMAH model and Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-determination Theory (SDT). Applying an Appreciative Inquiry research design, this investigation encompassed four research phases: Discovery; Dream; Design; and Destiny. Each phase provided the basis from which to explore existing strength-based practices and to envision elaborations and innovative applications of strength-based concepts and practices within a dual dimensional approach to inclusionary education and learning.

The final chapter begins with an overview of the key themes that emerged though the first three research phases. In these sections, the key research questions that guided each phase are reviewed and associated findings are synthesised and discussed considering current insights from the literature and implications related to the focal area of inquiry. These initial sections also include quotes from participants that are striking and that provocative, eliciting further reflection and direction for discussion. For the fourth research phase, the overarching implications of this investigation are examined culminating in the presentation of an emerging model for conceptualizing strength concepts and practices as primary elements within a dual dimensional model to

inclusionary education. At the close of this chapter, limitations and directions for further research are delineated and a final personal reflection on the research process is included.

Discussion of the Discovery Phase

Three key areas of inquiry guided the Discovery Phase. Through individual interviews, these questions facilitated the exploration of participants' perspectives related to the relevance of strength-based approaches to inclusionary educational settings, the current use of such methods, and the enhancements and challenges experiences as a result of these applications.

- *From the perspective of educational leaders, educators, and school services personnel, what is the relevance of strength-based practices to the creation of inclusionary learning environments?*
- *How are strength-based concepts and practices applied or integrated within inclusionary school and classroom structures and processes?*
- *What positive learning enhancements or challenges are associated with integration of such concepts and practices?*

From the preceding areas of inquiry, aggregate analysis of the individual participant interviews revealed five primary theme categories that arose during the Discovery Phase: *The Unfolding of Inclusionary Education, Gap-Oriented Perspectives, Areas of Professional Dissonance, Impacts of Applied Strengths, and Pursuing a Strength-based Paradigm*. The preceding theme categories are examined within the discussion of the three areas of research inquiry that guided the Discovery Phase.

Table 5

Discovery Phase Areas of Inquiry

Area of Inquiry 1: ***Relevance of Strengths:*** *The Unfolding of Inclusionary Education; Gap-Oriented Perspectives*
Area of Inquiry 2: S*trength-based Applications:* *Areas of Professional Dissonance; Emergent Strength-based Practices*
Area of Inquiry *3: Enhancements, Challenges and Opportunities:* *Experienced and Envisioned Impacts of Applied Strengths Pursuing a Strength-based Paradigm*

Area of Inquiry 1: Relevance of Strengths: *The Unfolding of Inclusionary Education; Gap-Oriented Perspectives*

A key focus of the Discovery Phase interviews was to invite participants to describe the relevance of individual strengths in the promotion of student learning, engagement, and flourishing in inclusionary classroom and school settings. The first question encouraged participants to reflect on their own educational history and experiences as educators. Some participants with over three decades of teaching experience were able to recall the initiation of inclusionary approaches as far back as the 1980s. The posing of the initial question gave rise to an unanticipated point of discussion related to the early application of inclusion in the context of New Brunswick's schools. Others with professional experience spanning 15 to 20 years shared insights in terms of more recent changes and shifts within inclusionary approaches and emphasis on strength-based methods.

Descriptions of participants' experiences at the time of New Brunswick's initial efforts for the integration of all students within mainstream schools, regardless of their individual needs or challenges, highlighted several important features that situated the

discussion of the relevance of applying strengths to support student learning. Participants provided a tremendous amount of rich dialogue which uncovered many of the underlying beliefs, thoughts, and interpretations surrounding New Brunswick's history of adopting and adapting an inclusionary model of education. This *new school experience* was accompanied by the development and rollout of a range of new student support services inclusive of pull-out remedial strategies, resource teacher roles, direct classroom interventions, and the implementation of teacher-assistant roles in an attempt to bridge the *gap* in terms of academic achievement among students, and in an effort to address the range of exceptionalities now emerging within classrooms in the 80s and 90s. Participants indicated that many of these support strategies were aimed at assisting students with specific academic or learning needs to *fit into* the regular classroom experience or to some extent, *be the same* as their peers with respect to learning and academic growth. Initial conceptualization of the notion of inclusion appeared to place emphasis on supporting specifically those students experiencing learning difficulties within mainstream classrooms through filling in *gaps*, addressing *deficits* or attending to varying learning needs (Kershner, 2016).

In the context of Keyes' dual-dimensional model (2002) a key focus of initial inclusionary practices in New Brunswick appeared to reflect an emphasis on the provision of support-oriented practices centered on individual students, and to a lesser extent on strength-focused approaches linked to student growth or flourishing. While Keyes contends that health-related applications related to well-being have focused primarily on support-oriented approaches to address specific challenges or gaps, it may

be that within the arena of education, there also has been a preoccupation with identified problems or deficits related to learning.

Zakaria et al. (2016) state that deficit approaches within the field of education often are characterized by assessment and intervention strategies that seek to identify and remediate areas of academic weakness or gaps related to learning. Deficit-oriented perspectives rely on diagnostic or *labeling* strategies that are based on assessments of students' experienced difficulties or areas of challenge (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Energy and resources become focused on what students *can't do*, resulting in activities and teaching methods geared to *fixing deficiencies* in order to *close the gap* in student achievement. Those learners who are perceived to be *in need* due to the observed challenges they are experiencing are provided with varied levels of service intensity and access to learning support services. Zakaria et al. (2016) contend that deficit-oriented approaches to education may have limited impact on student learning as they often omit or neglect the inherent strengths and innate abilities of student learners. The preceding perspectives underscore the notion for the need for a strength-oriented dimension of inclusionary education that not only bolsters our efforts to provide academic supports, but also to promote flourishing as described by Keyes (2002) in learning, especially for those who may have specific learning needs or exceptionalities.

A focus on strengths and flourishing draws learning into a broader context of personal growth and development inclusive of experiencing positive emotions or well-being, being thoroughly engaged, forming connections with others, finding meaning in our pursuits, and experiencing a sense of accomplishment (Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Keyes (2002) highlights that engaging a strength-based dimension involves

identifying what is *good* in one's life. In much the same way, educators must focus on identifying and building up students' strengths for learning (Rose, 2006). As Weiner (2006) asserts:

> "We can make powerful changes when we break through the pervasive influence of the deficit paradigm and recognize the untapped strengths of students and teachers" (p. 70).

From participants with several decades of teaching experience, vivid images from the early years of inclusion depicted educational efforts wrapped up in the delivery of support-oriented services with decreased emphasis on the intentional use of student strengths within educational instructional strategies or processes. The notion of student strengths, as one participant stated "*did not enter into the conversation"* when planning student learning especially for students who may have struggled with existing curriculum expectations. Participants noted that, for many students, not reaching expected academic outcomes was accompanied by internalized feelings of *not being good enough* alongside of their peers. In terms of learning, such diminished feelings of self were identified as closely linked with discouragement, decreased confidence and lower levels of motivation or engagement.

The feelings of *not being good enough* and impacts on student learning related to motivation, engagement and self-confidence align closely with Bandura's (1977) conceptualization of self-efficacy. According to Bandura, support solely in the form the provision of needed knowledge or prerequisite skills to complete an academic task is not sufficient to promote or realize demonstrated learning. He asserts that learners must also possess the conviction or confidence that they can achieve the task even in the midst of

challenges or difficult circumstances. In this regard, self-efficacy involves knowledge and skills, in concert with students' beliefs about their efficacy or personal effectiveness to grow and learn. These two aspects of self-efficacy act upon one another and are what Bandura referred to as *reciprocal causation* (Artino, 2012).

Bandura (1977) contends that students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to be engaged and willing to take risks in their learning. These students are often seen to embrace new challenges that are encountered in the classroom because they possess the belief that *they can* (Bertills et al., 2021). Participants described students' awareness of their strengths as an important source of motivation related to their engagement in learning activities. As one participant highlighted through identifying and mobilizing *"students' natural strengths and interests",* students can feel a growing sense of pride and confidence, knowing that what they have is *good* and *good enough* to support their potential for learning and success. When students do not see their abilities fitting within the scope of their learning context, and their strengths are not applied, this can significantly impact their feelings of self-worth, self-confidence, and ultimately their self-efficacy. Participants asserted that more recent years have seen an increased emphasis on the application of students' strengths in inclusionary education through emerging efforts to promote student wellbeing, social emotional learning, the development of global competencies, and the role that strengths play in terms of intrinsic and academic-related motivation.

Closely entwined with strength-based perspectives on learning are students' sense of self-efficacy, their views of self-worth and their belief in the confidence to learn. Bandura's construct of self-efficacy overlaps to great extent with Deci and Ryan's

conceptualization of individuals' sense of competency. From their perspectives, competency is described as feelings of accomplishment and self-worth when individuals are recognized for their gifts, abilities, strengths, and achievements (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Morrison & Peterson, 2015). Similar to self-efficacy and consistent with the preceding concept of competency, peoples' sense of self-worth and confidence for learning may be influenced by experiencing success and the positive emotions that accompany these experiences, as well as by feedback and positive affirmation received from others regarding their potential to engage their strengths in varied contexts (Artino, 2012). In the context of relationships where feelings of worth and confidence are fostered, Deci and Ryan describe such conditions as conducive to the fulfillment of the core psychological well-being need of competency. They also highlight two other psychological well-being needs in addition to competency, more specifically relatedness and autonomy support needs (Wang et al., 2019). Deci and Ryan's well-being needs have also been referred to as core motivational processes critical to the learning environments, student engagement, and academic advancement. Research associated with their model suggests that when students' psychological well-being needs are met:

> …they tend to stay engaged and persist longer, and acquire knowledge in a more coherent form, apply their knowledge more often, and achieve higher academic performance over the long term (Wang et al., 2019, p. 1).

In the context of Deci and Ryan's model, setting the conditions for student learning involves developing an understanding of students' intrinsic motivations and fostering their *joy of learning* through the fulfilment of core well-being needs. This is accomplished through the development of learning routines and interactions that build

positive connections (relatedness), value or affirm students' strengths and gifts (competency) and provide opportunities for voice and choice (autonomy support) as critical aspects of daily learning processes (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reeve, 2012; Wang et al., 2019).

In the preceding section, the relevance of and need for strength-based perspectives and practices becomes more evident when educational models emphasize deficit-only perspectives in the absence of understanding and valuing the inherent strengths of children and youth. When strengths are introduced in our educational conversations and planning activities, key conditions for fostering learning are clarified and potentially enhance the quality of instructional techniques and support practices by taking into account other relevant features of learning such as students' sense of self-worth, their self-efficacy, their intrinsic motivation and engagement, and well-being. The preceding features are common concepts and perspectives arising from research carried out within the field of positive psychology (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Seligman, 2011).

In recent years, the refocus on strengths within educational settings utilizing research from Positive Psychology has become recognized as Positive Education. Waters (2021) notes that Positive Education perspectives have been applied in many international educational settings using a whole-school approach to foster student well-being and support academic performance. The association between well-being and positive academic development aligns with the two underlying components of Keyes' flourishing dimensions. These components include a focus on individuals' experience of positive emotions such as joy and satisfaction within daily life (positive emotions), and an emphasis on positive functioning reflected in having purpose and achieving personal

growth in daily living. In addition to Deci and Ryan's motivational theory-based model of psychological well-being needs, Positive Education applications have also included Seligman's PERMAH model, composed of six well-being elements: *Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment and Health*. These elements also appear to align well with the components of Keyes' flourishing dimension. For example, *Positive Emotions, Relationships*, and *Health* align with general themes of well-being, whereas *Meaning, Engagement,* and *Accomplishment* are indicative of individuals' positive functioning, growth, and development (Green, et al., 2021).

There is a pertinent relevance to the acknowledgement of student strengths and the impact this can have on growth and development, both academically and personally. When a student's strengths are identified and leveraged allowing them access to their learning in a way that is meaningful for them, students will become inherently more engaged. *"Students naturally gravitate to what they are good at."* Being able to access what they are learning and have choice in terms of how they are demonstrating that learning through the use of their natural abilities provides them with a sense of ownership as well as renewed confidence in their competency and abilities to succeed. In considering the examples that participants provided on the relevance of strengths in relation to the struggling student, they expressed the understood truth among educators that: *"Students know what they're not good at. They know when they are in the low reading group. That begins to effect their confidence."* Students need to see themselves and their abilities differently, in the context of their strengths and potential to learn.

In addition to students, there is equal importance within a dual pathway perspective for educators to identify and apply their own strengths within their

professional practice. As one participant asserted a core strength-based principle is that *everyone has strengths* to apply within school and learning environments. Another highlighted that "*it's up to the leadership somewhere to elevate educators"* and to *leverage* their strengths to create *"impactful and great schools."* Educators need to feel valued and appreciated. Recognition of the skills and talents they possess is a way to acknowledge the value that they have within their classrooms and their school community. Encouraging educators to recognize their strengths and to share how they use them within the context of planning for student learning may be a crucial step in increasing insight into the relance of dual perspectives of inclusionary education, that acknowledge the need for support and flourishing dimensions.

Area of Inquiry 2: Strength-based Applications: *Areas of Professional Dissonance; Emergent Strength-based Practices*

For participants, the push and pull between support-oriented and strength-based perspectives and practices emerged as points of tension or areas of dissonance. Professional dissonance, as defined by Taylor & Bentley (2005) is: "a feeling of discomfort arising from the conflict between professional values and expected or required job tasks" (p. 470).

The first overall area of dissonance was the overarching focus on *Gaps vs. Strengths*. To support student learning in spite of these challenges, educators spend an enormous amount of time and energy developing and applying targeted interventions to promote mastery of those outcomes. Insight from participants suggested that intervention or support without engagement or some level of personal connection with students was not as impactful for student learning. As Constantini et al. (2019) assert, the use of individual strengths, "is not only beneficial in that it drives high performance, but also

because it is intrinsically motivating, enjoyable, engaging, satisfying and energising*"* (p. 2).

A second tension arose in considering the targeted mastery of outcomes within current *curriculum-centered approaches* in contrast to more *student-centered approaches* to learning. The weighted focus on curriculum content and expectations within schools and classrooms was perceived by participants as often not taking into consideration the existing areas of strengths or interests of students, or other inherent sources of intrinsic motivation, especially for those experiencing difficulty in their learning. According to Hammond & Zimmerman (2012), having a strong and sole focus on curricular outcomes may sometimes result in educators overlooking all that a student has to offer in terms of mobilizing existing learner strengths and interests. Kanuka (2010) highlights that a student-centered approach to learning emphasizes the experience and voice of learners through active exchanges and dialogue in the context of meaningful learning activities. In addition, student-centered methods encourage an active discovering and creating of knowledge through real-world experiences (Freire, 2018; Kanuka, 2010). Key processes associated with student centred learning processes include problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, innovation, and creativity (Sawyer, 2008).

The third point of dissonance highlighted preoccupations with student learning problems or gaps and the propensity to remediate or the need to *fix* such concerns in students educational experience. Dudley-Marling (2015) asserts that the notion of fixing students perpetuates a deficit-thinking approach. In contrast to fixing, he notes that schools should be challenged to embrace more strength-focused perspectives that operationalize learning opportunities for students that are engaging and enriching for

them by leveraging expanded resources and broader-based learning experiences. Such meaningful and relevant learning experiences closely align with the concept of autonomy supportive teaching methods. According to Deci et al. (1981) when students perceive that educators support their autonomy in lieu of impeding it, they are more intrinsically motivated to learn (Deci et al., 1981; Reeve 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Current literature indicates that people's engagement in activities is enhanced when autonomy-support is evident to them (Chatzisarantis & Hagger 2009; Deci et al., 1994; Jang et al. 2010; Reeve et al. 2004; Steele & Fullagar 2009). A meta-analysis carried out by Su and Reeve (2011) identified five key educator strategies for supporting students' need for autonomy. These include:

(a) providing rationales for the tasks,

(b) acknowledging negative feelings,

(c) using non-controlling language,

(d) offering choices, and

(e) nurturing motivational resources (e.g., relatedness, interest, joy, and others)

(Yuan & Kim, 2017, p. 4-5)

A final point of tension identified by participants was the perceived push and pull between regarding strengths as an *add on* or "*just one more thing to do"* or viewing strengths as a critical component of inclusionary necessary for student learning. At the outset of the study, Keyes' two-continua model for well-being (2002) was identified as a potential framework that could be applied within the context of inclusionary education. Interviews and resulting discussions with participants during the Discovery Phase provided positive support for the existence of the proposed two dimensions within current

approaches and practices to inclusion and student learning. This included one dimension focusing on the provision of supports for student learning, and a second one focusing on student strengths and the relevance of strengths to students' academic motivation and development, and potential for flourishing in terms of their learning. According to Kristjánsson (2017), the delineation of a *flourishing* dimension within education requires taking, "a strength-based approach to student wellbeing; it is all about furthering assets that students already possess in nascent forms and helping them continue developing" (p. 188).

One participant highlighted that both support-oriented and strength-based approaches to student learning are evident, but *not integrated* within a singular model of student learning or inclusionary methods. This individual provided examples of existing support-orientated educational structures and depicted them on one dimension (e.g., Educational Student Support Teams, Integrated Service Delivery, Response to Intervention), and then on a separate one described what they viewed to be examples of strength-related educational models (e.g., (Universal Design for Learning, Social-emotional Learning, Positive Mental Health in schools, Career Portfolios, and global student competencies).

Although support-oriented methods have been a persistent and central aspect in the unfolding of inclusionary education, the same participant indicated that intentional efforts would be needed to make strengths a more focal and strategic dimension of current inclusionary education practices. In the subsequent focus group sessions, the preceding perspective resonated with participants and provided them with a vision of a potential framework on which to reflect and envision directions for resolving areas of

professional dissonance related to the application of strength-based perspective and practices.

The example strength-based approaches and practices provided by participants highlighted the importance of forming strong relationships or connections with students, the application of students' strengths within learning strategies, and the importance of valuing and inviting student voice and choice, aligning well with Deci and Ryan's model of motivation and well-being (2008). The exploration of strengths began with a considerable emphasis on students' sense connection or relatedness in terms of their relationships with staff, their peers, and their sense of belonging to their school community. As noted by Cummins (2000):

> Human relationships are the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any method of teaching literacy, or science, or math. When powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently can transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools alike (p. 165).

Niemic and Ryan (2009) asserted that students who perceive that teachers "genuinely like, respect, and value them" (p. 139) are more likely to persist academically even when tasks are deemed to be more challenging or demanding (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Seligman's (2011) PERMAH model also identifies relationships to be one of the key components of the establishment of a positive learning environment and educational experience for students. Pascha (2019) describes the concept of positive connection,

sense of relatedness or belonging as a prerequisite condition in supporting individuals' adaptation and flourishing in daily interactions and routines.

Participants noted that seemingly simple practices such as having each student's name posted on the door, hanging their art in the hall, and ensuring they have a physical *place* in the classroom provides students with a sense of belonging, ensuring that they feel like a valued member of the classroom community. Movkebayeva et al. (2016) affirmed that such strategies applied in an attempt to connect with students can have a positive impact on their feelings towards themselves, others, and their learning experience as a whole (Movkebayeva et al., 2016; Williamson & Gilham, 2017). Reflection on my own role as a classroom teacher, one of my primary practices in establishing connection within our classroom culture is the practice of having *family meetings.* These meetings allow students to share their feelings, concerns, or perspectives as well as to listen to those of their peers, fostering a sense of community within the classroom and mutual sense of being valued and connected to others.

Participants' narrative related to existing strength-based perspectives and practices also highlighted the intentional use of students' strengths in the context of learning, contributing to their sense of accomplishment and confidence in learning, as well their perceived potential for success in their endeavours. This aspect of participants' sharing aligned well with Deci and Ryan's concept of competency as a critical well-being need. Both SDT and PERMAH both recognize the importance of students holding strong beliefs in their own abilities in learning, thus influencing positively their motivation to continue their journey of learning and development, and ultimately achieving success (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Noble & McGrath, 2015; Seligman, 2011). As one participant

asserted, students are more engaged when their strengths are utilized and *"Students will naturally gravitate towards what they are good at."*

Personalized learning allows students to build knowledge, understanding, and skills through the application of their personal learning preferences, areas of interest, aspirations (dreams) or other sources of internal motivation (what is important to them). The engagement of students' strengths within personalized learning or personalized learning plans was viewed as a potential positive elaboration to existing support strategies that have generally characterized the central thrusts of such individualized plans. This would entail ensuring that within the development of personalized learning plans, students' "*inherent strengths and passions*" would be considered in concert with their current levels of achievement or educational needs when setting attainable goals for future learning endeavours. Consistent with the preceding assertion, Niemic and Ryan (2009) noted that student learning can be supported by educators introducing learning activities that are situated within students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

ZPD is a construct which emerged from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development referring to:

> …any situation in which some activity is leading children beyond their current level of functioning. Thus, the zone can operate during play, work, school studies, and other … activities (Miller, 2011, p. 178).

Vygotsky stated that for educators to be focused solely on: "…what the child is capable of doing independently, we study yesterday's development. Studying what the

child is capable of doing cooperatively, we ascertain tomorrow's development" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 202).

Working within the ZPD includes scaffolding methods which involve educators' active involvement in motivating and guiding learners, providing them with the necessary support for their emerging skills to develop. Scaffolding requires educators to have a deep knowledge of each student, their challenges, as well as their strengths in order to anticipate learners' needs and motivations throughout their individual developmental journeys (Guseva & Solomonvich, 2017). Vygotsky (1997) contended that it is critical for educators not to ignore or miss the inherent strengths and interests that students possess, but rather strive to detect the "true uniqueness" of each child (p. 98). Similarly, Siegel (2012) affirmed that our role, as educators, is to see students for their strengths and "search hard for the talents within people and make sure that the school system, families, and individuals have an opportunity to develop their talents" (p. 74).

The literature related to fulfilling students' needs for competency underscores the relevance of strength-based approaches and the process of uncovering, developing, applying, and assessing students' strengths within the context of their learning. Schreiner and Anderson (2004) likened uncovering students' hidden strengths to unexpectedly "catching" (p. 10) students doing something well. Lopez and Louis (2009) asserted that one of the primary responsibilities of a strength-based educators is to:

> draw out the strengths that exist within students by heightening students' awareness of them and cultivating a greater future orientation around how students' strengths might be catalyzed (p. 5).

Drawing students' attention towards their inherent gifts or strengths, allows them to *see, accept*, and *appreciate* how applying these strengths could potentially "increase their motivation, confidence, and efficacy" (Schreiner & Anderson, 2004, p. 10) and as a result, their academic achievement and success.

Amplifying students' strengths is a continuous developmental process that can be facilitated by educators, providing space for students to "talk about goals within the context of personal strengths" (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 4). Through explicit and intentional interactions, educators can illuminate how students' individual strengths can "provide a pathway" between "where they are" and "where they're going" (p. 4). Much like Vygotsky's scaffolding approach (Guseva & Solomonovich, 2017), educators can model practices which have the potential to leverage personal strengths in learning and other facets of daily life (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Further development of these assets, Schreiner and Anderson (2004) assert, can be achieved by educators amassing opportunities and experiences within a student's given field of interest, allowing them to apply, enhance, and expand their strengths to their fullest potential.

Flowing naturally from participants' shared stories regarding the use of strengths in learning emerged the need for student choice and voice to be considered in application of educational strategies along with the highlighted aspects of relatedness and competency. This third aspect related to the use of strength-based perspectives and practices, reflecting the essence of Deci and Ryan's (2008) third psychological need for autonomy support. Participants described autonomy support in the context of inclusionary education as experiences in which students felt empowered in relation to their learning. Examples of autonomy support included inviting students to express their

preferences in how to choose or access mediums to pursue learning, as well as the provision of choice and application of flexible student-centric approaches (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012; Morrison & Peterson, 2015b; Nunez & Leon, 2015; OECD, 2016).

Participants also shared their use of collaborative strategies where students were invited to co-create resources geared towards the development and application of knowledge. Such approaches included collaborative methods involving the development of rubrics, the creation of activity choice menus, the formation of project-based learning options, and the use of technology and multi-media formats to extend learning beyond the wall of the classroom. Recent innovations in learning emphasize the importance of developing learners' agency and autonomy through the intentional use of student inquiry and discovery methods. Such approaches promote and ensure the application of student choice and agency throughout the planning, preparation, and execution of instructional designs (Sousa, 2009; Sua et al., 2019; Winebrenner & Brulles, 2012).

As noted by Niemic and Ryan (2009), student autonomy, or their perceived level of autonomy, can be supported by teachers through the development and implementation of activities that provide elements of both voice and choice. Providing students with autonomy, within the parameters of the targeted curriculum outcomes, and allowing an element of choice in how they access their learning or develop new skills through their existing strengths or interests, not only enhances student motivation and engagement, but also strengthens their active role as self-directed learners within classroom or school settings (Reeve 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2002). Current studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between student autonomy support and positive gains related to academic achievement, enhanced creativity, heightened student well-being, and evidence

of greater retention or longevity with respect to school connectedness (Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Grolnick et al., 1991; Koestner et al., 1984; Vallerand et al., 1997; Wang et al., 2019).

Area of Inquiry 3: Impacts, Challenges, and Opportunities: *Experienced and Envisioned Impacts of Applied Strengths; Pursuing a Strength-based Paradigm*

Throughout individual participant interviews, participants noted one of the most evident enhancements was the distinct shift in the classroom culture or environment. One participant noted: ***"****As a principal, when you walked into different classrooms, you could tell. You could feel it".* Calp (2020) described the essence of a positive learning environment as facilitating happiness among students, educators, and support staff. Mitchum (2005) contends that the creation of a positive learning environment supports student learning as well as promotes positive classroom behaviour and choices.

Participants also shared that while students may still continue to experience struggles throughout their learning journeys, the mindset and application of such approaches allow them to face these challenges through the use of their strengths. Participants spoke of providing students with the necessary *tools* and *language* to address their areas of challenge and persevere in spite of them. Brendtro et al. (2005) assert that "strengths enable one to cope with difficult life challenges, a common definition of resilience" (p. 130). Beyond Galloway et al.'s (2020) assertion that leveraging students' strengths can assist them in their present learning, Linley (2008) contends that through "identifying and nurturing" strengths at a young age and forward, students can experience impactful and long-standing gains across the lifespan.

Based on a dual-dimensional view of inclusionary education, applying Keyes' model would require the recognition of both support-oriented and strength-based

perspectives and practices and the need for their integration in supporting student learning and growth. In addition, such integration would require a greater amplification of strength-based perspectives and practices among educators, perhaps even a new mindset or paradigm grounded in strength-based thinking and applications. In pursuing a greater emphasis on strengths across school cultures participants highlighted the critical role of school leadership and school-wide collaboration in developing a vision for the use of strengths, as well as leveraging the experiences and successes of educators who are already immersed in strength-focused pedagogy.

Brownlee et al. (2012) assert that the strength-based paradigm:

> …is based on the idea that everyone has strengths and that everyone has the potential to use these strengths to achieve personal goals. The strengths perspective also includes the assumption that by using their strengths students can achieve a better quality of life (p. 3).

Individual interviews placed emphasis on administrative teams and their role in the mobilization and adoption of a strength-based mindset and the application of associated practices within school cultures. Dove et al. (2014) highlight the importance of school leadership in promoting a common vision or paradigm among educators through the implementation of team building processes and collaborative exchanges. Collaborative co-construction of a clear vision for the school staff was viewed by participants as pivotal for introducing, promoting, and embedding strength-based perspective and practices within their respective school cultures. As Yusof et al. (2016) state, pursuing enhancement of school cultures occurs when:

> …teachers collaborate in maintaining continuous school improvement activities, build an organisational structure that can help to support each other, can talk in detail about the problems in education and work as a group to improve the performance of the individuals and school (Yusof et al., 2016, p. 275).

In pursuing a greater emphasis on strengths, participants also asserted the viability of leveraging the experiences and successes of educators who are already immersed in strength-focused perspectives and practices. Such educators can produce a spark that can potentially motivate and encourage others to embrace certain strength-based concepts and begin to implement them into their own classroom practice. One participant acknowledged the power of *unicorn teachers* or *early adopters* of strengths in terms of their potential to *"change schools"*. Neumann et al. (2012) asserted educators may inspire one another and impact the professional development of their peers by serving as positive examples. As one participant envisioned, the promotion of strengths across school cultures could be impacted by bringing together and engaging the potential of "*an amazing team of teachers*" or collective with a common passion and expertise in apply strengths.

Considering a process for change that would be applied at the system level seemed daunting at this juncture of the research investigation. The participants of this study, however, possessed a deep understanding of a strength-based mindset, demonstrated a solution-focused dedication to the continued and future learning of New Brunswick's students, and viewed the potential of the proposed dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education with hope and optimism.

Discussion of the Dream Phase

Three key areas of inquiry guided the Dream Phase. These questions facilitated the exploration of participants' perspectives related to the relevance of strength-based approaches to inclusionary educational settings, the current use of such methods, and the enhancements and challenges experiences as a result of these applications in the focus group session for this phase of the research.

- *If you could envision the ideal inclusionary school or classroom that engaged strength-based perspectives and practices, what would it look like?*
- *How would they be structured or organized?*
- *What key processes, interactions or practices would be evident?*

From the preceding areas of inquiry, aggregate analysis of the individual participant interviews revealed four primary theme categories that arose during the Dream Phase: *The Role of Visionaries, Strength-based Mindset, Strength-based Practices, and the Process for Change*. The preceding theme categories are examined within the discussion of the three areas of research inquiry that guided the Dream Phase.

Table 6

Dream Phase Areas Inquiry

Area of Inquiry 4: *The Vision:* *The Role of Visionaries*
Area of Inquiry 5: *The Structure:* *Guiding Strength-based Paradigm*
Area of Inquiry 6: *The Process:* *Envisioned Strength-based Practices; Process for Change*

Area of Inquiry 4: The Vision: *The Role of Visionaries*

The envisioning of strength-based classroom and school settings was described in terms of embracing expanded views of the nature of support strategies through blending

and reshaping them through a positive view of students' gifts and potential. Promoting such a vision was seen as a tri-fold process, beginning with the influence and impact of visionary leaders within education, the encouragement of autonomy support for educators, and the creation of a community of practice among school staff and across districts that engage collaborative methods, coaching, and mentorship in the application strength-based practices.

In reviewing the themes which had emerged thus far to guide the discussion, at the outset of the Dream Phase focus group, initial conversations identified the need to review and reframe the perceived role and title of *leadership.* There is a need to move away from the traditional notions of *leadership,* creating instead a culture of visionaries who feel empowered to enact change within their inclusionary education settings. The participant quotes, which have been included below, are provocative and speak clearly to the need to redefine this role and put in place structures that bolster and empower individuals within schools, districts, and departments to become visionaries, leading others in this shift towards strengths. *"I'm just wondering if we're telling people that there needs to be a leader and if you don't have a leader then this isn't going to work";* and *"I create an environment within my school, they're all leaders within the building not only in their subject matter".*

This mindset of creating a culture of visionaries motivated through the application of their own strengths aligns directly with the principles of the strength-based approach itself. Yusof et al. (2016) noted that teacher leadership has the potential to be transformational to a school's culture and approach to student learning. Through a transformational lens of leadership, leaders are identified for their commitment to

working towards the achievement of a goal, leading their entire organization towards excellence. Such efforts provide a degree of *autonomy support* within the work environment, motivating colleagues to be confident in trying something new. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) assert that teacher leadership is fostered when the school first builds a culture throughout the school community that is supportive of teachers to develop their leadership skills and abilities. This requires teachers' collaboration and support from administrators, as well as a supportive environment (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Yusof et al., 2016).

Kaur et al. (2020) assert that within an autonomy supportive school culture, a school leader must be willing to reassess their level of power and authority within the school and adopt practices that allow *freedom, choice,* and *innovation* among the educators of their school. Such practices involve individual member input, collaborative practices, and active involvement in the *nurturing* of the learning climate and environment within the building.

Literature cites many effective practices which are shared among successful school leaders. The Wallace Foundation (2012) along with Leithwood et al. (2008) converged in their research, highlighting five essential practices for successful school leadership:

1) Creating a clear vision for student achievement.
2) Creating a position learning environment through cooperative and interaction methods
3) Connecting with individuals for the promotion of leadership development among educators

4) Providing improved professional development to enhance educator instruction
5) Pursuing school improvement through organizing and restructuring daily school processes

Such approaches support educators' need for autonomy, empowering educators to adopt more innovative and creative teaching methods (Iveland et al., 2019). In establishing autonomy supportive cultures within schools, there is a sense of safety and acceptance of *risk-taking* on the part of educators. Iveland et al. (2019) assert that when being encouraged to apply new methods or approaches in the classroom, teachers need to "feel safe in potentially failing when trying out different things in classrooms" (p. 5), knowing that they are supported by their school's leadership.

Discussion throughout the Dream Phase focus group emphasized the further role of school administration and teacher visionaries in mentoring educators within their schools to promote awareness, understanding, and implementation of strength-based practices. Literature confirms the fundamental need for coaching and mentoring practices in education and learning settings. Smith and Lynch (2014) highlight the *pivotal responsibility* of school leaders in prioritizing the appropriate time and providing the necessary conditions for the development of professional learning communities in which coaching, and mentoring can occur. One participant, in the role of school administrator, emphasized the importance of *"understanding your role in supporting, facilitating, and mentoring your teachers."* This participant's statement is echoed by Hamlin et al.'s (2006) assertion that: "truly effective managers and managerial leaders are those who embed effective coaching into the heart of their management practice" (p. 326).

Modeling and mentoring strategies within the school context are often structured and sustained processes between colleagues which are implemented to support professional learning as well as to promote the collaborative development of new practices and approaches within professional practice. Smith and Lynch (2014) convey that mentoring should entail a more holistic approach in which learning considers "the whole of an individual's relationship to work and their ability to thrive with it" rather than solely focusing on *transmitting* a targeted set of skills (p. 9).

Area of Inquiry 5: The Structure: *Guiding Strength-based Paradigm*

In response to the preceding area of inquiry, the development of a vision for amplifying strength-based methods within inclusionary educations was viewed as being positively impacted by the role of visionary leaders, the expansion autonomy supportive team approaches and the development of mentorship and coaching opportunities to promote the use of strength-based methods. As participants began to imagine and explore how such a vision could be operationalized, there was recognition that such efforts would need to be solution-focused view, creative, and optimistic. It was interesting to note that focus group deliberations during this aspect of the data gathering process did not focus on financial expenditures or infrastructure considerations, but on the importance of the establishment of a *strength-based paradigm* that would assist in setting planning priorities related to rolling out strength-based processes or structures within current educational operations. The emergence of such an overarching paradigm would ideally be widely understood and embraced by educators and leaders and would guide the development and structuring of processes related to a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education. Three underlying assumptions that emerged from

participant exchanges related to the notion of a guiding paradigm included the use of evidence related to strength-based methods, a belief in students' inherit strengths, and the adoption of relationship-centered educational planning and instructional practices, each one with implications for structuring educational processes and structures.

A guiding paradigm for the use of strength-based methods would encompass all educators and reinforce an intentional use of students' strengths in their learning. As one participant previously asserted during the Describe Phase, strength-based perspectives and practices exist but are largely separated from or viewed as *add ons* to our current model of education. Although strength-focused models cited by participants included UDL, SEL, and Global Competencies (*Profil de Sortie*), these frameworks were often referred to as stand-alone initiatives or applications, not necessarily integrated into daily educational plans or practices.

Glass and Smith (2012) contend that the adoption of a strength-based approach: "represents a paradigm shift—a movement away from a deficit-based approach/model… that fails to provide sufficient information about strengths and strategies to support a child's learning and development" (p. 6).

From their perspective, embracing an overarching strength-based paradigm would not only amplify beliefs about the relevance of student strengths to learning, but also expand the focus of educational priorities and planning beyond a solely support-oriented approach. This would entail integrating within our current operations the "*a growing body of research and evidence… that encourages educators"* to:

- Recognize that students learning is *"dynamic, complex and holistic",*
- Understand that students may demonstrate learning in diverse ways, and

- Engage students' inherent gifts and strengths (starting with what's present—not what's absent) as a starting point for the formulation of educational plans and approaches.

To some extent, working backwards form the Global Competencies or *Profil de Sortie*

would amplify the relevance of students' strengths to learning and begin to shape the processes and structures that would characterize a more integrated dual dimensional approach to inclusionary education, therefore embracing both Keyes' support and strength-oriented dimensions. Although examination of Global Competences aligns with a strength-based paradigm, participants affirmed that it is critical to know students' individual strengths, not just their learning challenges in order to operationalize a personalized approach to inclusionary education. An overarching theme that wraps around this entire investigation is the importance of establishing positive connections with students, embracing a relationship-centred approach. Throughout the previous Discovery Phase interviews as well as the Dream Phase focus groups, participants continuously emphasized the importance of intentionally fostering a sense of relatedness and belonging in students, returning to this point several times throughout discussions. Literature, similarly, highlights the role of connection in enhancing, improving, or changing students' experiences with learning within the context of their educational journeys.

Carney et al. (2014) and Lippman et al. (2011) contend that establishing positive connections with students is the first practice that will then facilitate all subsequent efforts, allowing them to be more effective in creating a positive learning environment

conducive to authentic engagement and motivation. Relationships built on trust, understanding, and respect contribute to the creation of a classroom environment where students feel safe, engaged, and confident in their abilities to take the necessary risks to learn new things and to develop themselves as self-directed learners (Alberta Education, 2013; Carney et al., 2014; Lippman et al., 2011; McCashen, 2005; Province of New Brunswick, 2016; Rapp & Goscha, 2006).

Participants noted that a sense of relatedness is embedded classroom or school's learning environments, when educators engage in *active listening* with students, promoting their engagement within their educational settings. Niemic and Ryan (2009) contend that when educators *truly listen* to what students have to say, learners feel that they have voice and choice in the manner in which they are learning, contributing to their need for autonomy support (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Listening also provides educators with relevant information regarding students' interests, facilitating the use of creative and flexibility formats for learning in which students are engaged and motivated (Pasha, 2019).

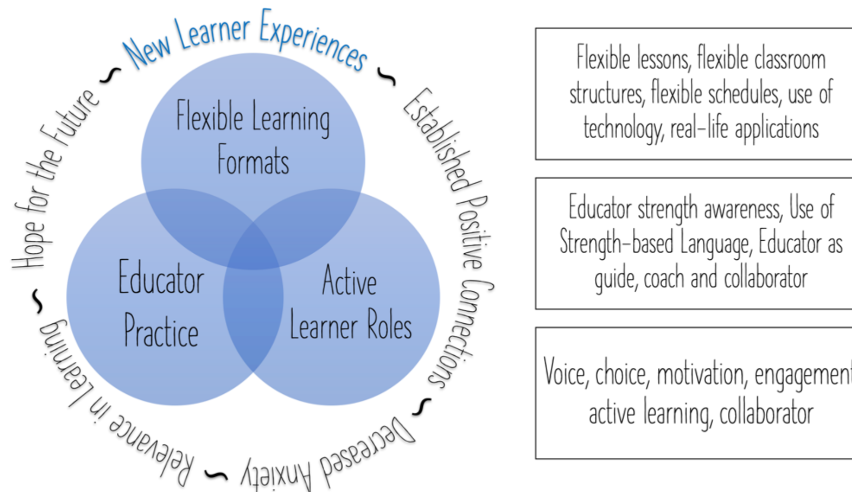
Area of Inquiry 6: The Process: *Envisioned Strength-based Practices; Process for Change*

After having considered the guiding structural components of a strength-based paradigm and approach to inclusionary education, participants highlighted eight overarching practices which should be observable when educators, schools, and districts were operating within a more intentional and integrated dual-dimensional approach. I have organized these practices within three spheres: *Flexible Learning Format, Educator Practices* and *Active Learner Roles*. These overlapping spheres are defined as key

elements of new learning experiences, one characterized by positive school connections, enhanced wellbeing (decreased anxiety), Learning Relevance, and Hope for the Future.

Figure 20

Envisioned Strength-based Practices



Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprathaban (2016) contend that flexible learning formats can be considered and integrated in different ways to enhance motivation and engagement in learning. Similarly, Alborno (2017) notes that through differentiation and flexible teaching styles, students can feel supported and achieve success. Rickabaugh et al. (2017) concur that flexibility within a learning environment promotes effective, learner-focused practices that provide a personalized approach to student learning as it addresses individual students' areas of need and interest.

In considering the application of strength-based concepts within educators' professional practice, Fullan and Langworthy (2014) noted the incorporation and implementation of such strategies to be *new pedagogies* within the field of education. The application of strength-based practices presents "a new model of learning partnerships

between and among students and teachers, aiming towards deep learning goals and enabled by pervasive digital access" (p. 4).

Furthermore, they assert that these practices encourage an enhanced quality of interaction, dialogue, and positive connection between teachers and students. Such aspects are considered to be critical components for the construction of deeper understanding and learning.

In support of a new and more active role to be played by students, Bentley (2000) asserts that learning needs to take place within a larger context where students are able to apply their knowledge and skills within their communities in different contexts. Such opportunities are engaging to students and allow them to see the value and relevance of their learning to their lives.

Promoting Educator Engagement and buy-in. Participants highlighted the need for a clear process of change to be implemented, allowing a strength-based paradigm to *take hold* among educators becoming integrated and embedded, guiding educational practices. Educational approaches supported by a strengths-based model:

> …represent a return to basic educational principles that emphasize the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as human strengths…explores ways to empower individuals to flourish rather than simply survive and presupposes that capitalizing on one's best qualities is likely to lead to greater success than would be possible by making a comparable investment of effort into overcoming personal weaknesses or deficiencies (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 1-2).

Participants spoke of the need for awareness of the strength-based approach and its guiding principles. For educators to be able to identify and amplify the strengths of

their students, they must first be aware of their own inherent strengths and how they apply them within their work and daily lives. As Lopez and Louis (2009) underscore:

> Strengths-based education begins with educators discovering what they do best and developing and applying their strengths as they help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence (p.2).

An awareness and appreciation of strengths, participants asserted, would ideally promote *educators' engagement and buy-in* supporting the adoption and integration of strength-based methods as part of students' learning experiences.

Use of Strength-based Language. According to participants, applying strength-based approaches within an inclusionary education setting should include a discernable and consistent use of *strength-based language*. Strength-based language needs to be consistently modeled by the administration, educators, and other school personnel (McCashen, 2005; Alberta Education, 2013; Province of New Brunswick, 2016; Rapp & Goscha, 2006). Individualized learning plans must also incorporate this language so that students can *"see themselves within their learning"* and targeted learning goals (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathanban, 2016; Laija-Rodriguez et al. 2013).

Creation of Strength-aligned Curriculum. Within participants' vision of a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education, they shared that the modeling and consistent use of strength-based language and perspectives should extend to the documents, policies and resources used to support student learning.

Within inclusive education models, curriculum aims to be inclusive, multilayered, dynamic, and holistic (OECD, 2020). The findings of this report contend that strength-

based programming can improve student engagement and retention due to their ability to identify and apply their strengths within the context of their learning. Curriculum and programming grounded in strength-based language can be applied to all students, regardless of their experiences or backgrounds. Stebleton et al. (2012) assert that such applications are practical as it impacts students' awareness of their strengths and provides them with the necessary language to describe and discuss their personal strengths. The OECD report (2020) affirms that:

> Embedding attitudes and values into curriculum refers to explicitly recognising their importance as part of a holistic education, beyond knowledge and skills, to support and guide students in navigating an uncertain future…including both learning and well-being (p. 11).

Clarified Strength-based Resources and Methods. Within the support-oriented approach to learning, students with identified learning challenges receive supports as they are highlighted in their developed Personalized Learning Plans (PLP). Such plans, one participant noted, *"work with some deficit wording...Do they really reflect on kids progress?"* Within a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education that incorporates strength-based concepts and practices, one participant proposed that within a learners' PLP there should be *"an objective based on strength. We need students to be able to say what they're good at."* Laija-Rodriquez et al. (2013) acknowledge that while student strengths are often listed within a PLP, such talents and abilities are rarely applied as a means of supporting student learning.

The use of strength-based language and perspectives in PLP development, Weishaar (2010) contends, reframes students as capable and valuable members of the

inclusionary classroom setting. Highlighting students' inherent attributes, Elder and Rood (2018) add, provides a starting point for educators to provide support in classroom instruction and various learning opportunities, while keeping student strengths, talents, and interests at the forefront.

When *dreaming* of an ideal system operating within a strength-based paradigm, participants highlighted the need for *assessment methods to also consider the strengths* of the individual learner. Participants did not dispute the need for assessments to demonstrate and monitor student learning. Rather, one participant asserted that *"evaluations, provincial examinations or tests need to reflect more the progress being made by each student across time."* Rather than assigning a final mark or predetermined measure of student achievement, learners would be assessed based on their individual academic growth and progress.

Fourie and Van Niekerk (2001) assert that since educators' approaches to learning and instruction have changed, so too must the approaches and procedures for assessment. Leighton (2020) highlights that learning is a holistic process that involves "not only enhancing students' cognitive skills, but also creating an environment of social and emotional support for students to learn." To this end, they assert, educators are challenged in measuring student learning as emphasis on student progress and mastery continues to be viewed "from a purely cognitive perspective" (p. 28).

Dimich (2015) contends that assessment, when applied and interpreted effectively, should provide both educators and students with information reflecting their strengths. Through a strength-based perspective, Rawana and Brownlee (2009) propose a model of assessment that considers students progression through stages of *engagement,*

exploration, expansion, and *evolution*. Such strength-based assessment models, according to Birgin and Bakki (2007), provide clear information about student learning and progress, not only for educators but learners and their families as well. Such information better serves educators to "determine the efficiency of the teaching" and guide future learning activities to further support student learning, enhance their confidence, and promote self-assessment abilities. Moss and Brookhard (2019) assert that such strength-based language and approaches to assessment not only support students' learning of content, but also familiarize them with the ability to understand their own individual process for learning. They assert that, "students learn more, learn smarter, and grow into self-aware learners who can tell you exactly what they did to get to exactly where they are." Such practices promote students to see themselves as "autonomous, confident, and capable" learners (p. 12).

Prioritized Time for Planning. Participants highlighted that embracing and operationalizing a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education would require a certain amount of restructuring of day-to-day scheduling and operations within school and classroom contexts. Such restructuring would allow for time to be prioritized and set aside for professional conversations, learning, planning, and instructional applications related to strength-based methods.

A study conducted by Kaplan et al. (2014) supported participants' contention that "the conventional school schedule does not allow teachers enough time" (p. 2) to collaborate with one another and pursue meaningful professional development and reflection on practices. Current literature provides different varied examples of ways in which school, district, and department leaders are working innovatively to provide such

professional opportunities for educators. Van Hook et al. (2010) provided school restructuring suggestions such as the provision of increased release time for teachers, the coordination of block scheduling, the engagement of additional substitute teachers to provide release time, the medication of the existing time commitments or constraints placed on educators, or the extension of the school calendar. Similarly, Archibald et al. (2011) cited pilot schools that had adapted the format of their weekly staff meetings, sharing pertinent administrative information by email, allowing time to be repurposed for professional development. Kaplan et al. (2014) asserted that *innovative leaders* in schools, similar to the role of *visionaries* proposed by study participants, should prioritize and dedicate time for professional and collaborative planning for educators given that it directly relates to their role for enhancing and enriching the learning experiences of students. Within their investigation, Kaplan et al. (2014) noted that such dedicated time allowed educators to grow professionally and collaborate with colleagues in reflecting on educational practices and planning innovative strategies for student learning.

Impacts associated with collaborative team approaches include a strengthened "ethos and sense of connectedness" for all team members (Elfrink et al., 2017). Hydon (2018) contends that collaborative team approaches place emphasis on strengths from a combined or collective perspective:

> Working collaboratively is not about giving up your unique strengths and qualities. Rather it is about an attitude of collegiality where the team benefits from the skills and abilities that each individual brings to the team (p. 1).

Encouraging continuity in teaching relationships. The importance of connection and relatedness that participants highlighted throughout this research

endeavour emphasized the value of this psychological well-being need in terms of student engagement, motivation, and well-being. In *knowing students* and uncovering their interests, passions, and preferences in learning, educators would become experts in student strengths.

Such practices, referred to within the field of education as *looping*, exist when a group of students remain with the same teacher for more than one school year (Niteki, 2017). Hedge and Cassidy (2004) highlight clear advantages for such practices:

1) Stability and continuity for students
2) Ease in transition from one school year to the next
3) Teacher knowledge of students allowing for anticipating learners' needs
4) Increased parent friendships and networking
5) Additional time to build trusting relationships
6) Development of stronger social connections among peers
7) Demonstration of enhanced social emotional skills
8) Increased parental support.

Minkel (2015) contends that looping provides educators with increased awareness and understanding of learners' strengths and interests. This, Niteki (2017) asserts, allows educators to develop and apply more effective and coherent instructional plans which align with the individual student's learning needs, leveraging their strengths.

The discussion of the Dream Phase of this research endeavour and its findings provided the initial considerations necessary to begin the final discussion of the Design and Destiny Phases, in which participants began to create structures and processes that

could be implemented within the education system, beginning the journey of turning this dream into an actionable reality.

Discussion of the Design

For the Design Phase, three areas of inquiry provided a focus for participants' reflections and deliberations. These questions invited them to explore how envisioned theme descriptions conveyed during the Dream Phase might be moved from a shared vision to the realization of elaborated strength-based methods within a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education. Areas of investigation encompassed roles of educators, creating readiness for change, and anticipated plans or actions. The following three questions guided focus group interactions:

- *How would traditional roles of educators, students, and other partners change, evolve, or be transformed within such settings?*
- *What considerations would be critical for creating readiness among educators to fully embrace such a vision?*
- *What strategic plans, actions, or processes would be essential for moving forward towards the realization of such a vision?*

Three primary theme categories that emerged during the Design Phase included: *Shift in Paradigm, Letting Go of the Curriculum-centric Focus, Process for Deep Change, and Collaborative Actions*. These results are examined within the discussion of the three areas of research inquiry that guided the Design Phase.

Table 7

Design Phase Areas of Inquiry

Area of Inquiry 7: ***New Roles:*** *Shift in Paradigm*
Area of Inquiry 8 and 9: ***Strategies for Educator Engagement:*** *Letting Go of the Curriculum-centric Focus; Process for Deep Change*
Area of Inquiry 9: ***Call to Action:*** *Process for Deep Change (continued); Collaborative and Creative Actions*

Area of Inquiry 7: New Roles: *Shift in Paradigm*

In considering the processes needed for such a change to be implemented within current educational structures and operations, participants noted that this change would be centered around a shift in professional paradigm and personal beliefs. Because the principles of the strength-based approach seem to be accepted on a superficial level, participants noted that beyond the necessary shift in paradigm was the need to *drill down*, to have a deeper appreciation and understanding of a strength-based paradigm, and its encompassing values and practices. Previous deliberations from the Discovery Phase regarding *Areas of Professional Dissonance* were highlighted as points of tension between current practice and strength-oriented perspectives needing further integration or elaboration of strength-based methods in emerging models of inclusionary education.

Early educational researchers such as Ausubel (1968) define the term *paradigm* to be a pattern through which we understand and make meaning from our experiences. The prompting of such a shift in thinking, according to Kuhn (1962) occurs:

> When enough significant anomalies (inconsistencies) have accrued against a current paradigm, a state of crisis is created which allows new ideas to be tried, eventually leading to a new paradigm (p. 67).

Jacobs and Farrell (2001) assert that a shift in paradigm allows for operational practices, processes, structures, and applications to be viewed and considered from a different perspective by "a particular professional community" (p. 1). The implications of such revolutionary changes in ideology and practice for educators, students, and other key stakeholders can be profound (Evans-Greenwood et al., 2015).

In conceptualizing a new paradigm, Evans-Greenwood et al. (2015) contend that the recognition of early signs of change can serve to guide the change that is initiated. These initial shifts in mindset and practice:

> …enables us to look beyond short-term incremental change and develop our understanding of the bigger shift. It is a framework that enables us to discover the interesting questions and experiments that will enable us to understand how the roles and relationships across and within the education sector will change (p. 22).

Furthermore, they recognize the process for change to be a challenge, requiring professionals "to understand how to get from here to there" (p. 31). Participants shared the need to move from a predominantly *curriculum only* approach to considering one which is more *student-focused*.

Participants noted that such a shift in paradigm would result in a change in how the various stakeholders within education would approach their roles. While educators are traditionally viewed as *instructors*, *experts*, and *authorities* within the classroom setting, participants noted that within a strength-based approach to learning, such roles would shift allowing educators to take on, instead, the role of *collaborator*, *coach*, and *guide*.

Jacobs and Farrell (2001) highlight that: "a key tenet of learner-centered instruction is that each learner is different, and that effective teaching needs to take these differences into account" (p. 9). Jacobs and Farrell assert that early efforts related to the move towards inclusion were focused on integrating students into mainstream classrooms, and in some instances emphasizing a *one-size-fits-all* with differences in student learning or diversity being regarded as challenging or perhaps even viewed as an *obstacle to be removed*. Within a new paradigm shifting towards the incorporation of strength-based perspectives, "diversity among students is not seen as an obstacle, but as a strength" (p. 9). Such a shift in educator mindsets promotes differentiation, personalization, and learner-centered perspectives in learning and instruction and ultimately shifts the relationship among educators and students to one that is more flexible, interactive, and collaborative (Grabinger et al., 2007; Guseva & Solomonovich, 2017).

While traditional models placed school leadership in a hierarchical position of *authority* and *power*, shifting practice to one which recognizes and values individual strengths would necessitate educational leaders within a school to leverage the individual strengths of students and staff through the provision of autonomy support, promoting their personal and professional development. According to Schapp (2019), school leadership roles operating within a strength-based approach place emphasis on developing the potential of educators through the leveraging their strengths. Rather than taking a managerial approach aimed at *changing* or *fixing* instructional practices and structures, a strength-based approach to school leadership would focus on promoting educator growth, development, and flourishing through application of autonomy

supportive methods (Ryan & Deci, 2002). In much the same way that educators are encouraged to discover strengths within their students, Schapp (2019) asserts that school leaders should intentionally seek to recognize, promote, develop, and *deploy* educator talents, gifts, and strengths. Former leadership practices such as *managing* would shift towards *coaching* and *mentoring* practices. Current research involving self-determination provides evidence of the relationship between autonomy supportive leader practices and their influence on educator motivation. When educators perceive autonomy support in their school cultures, "*they are empowered, receive confidence and opportunities to be creative*", and "*learners will benefit*" As Haerens (2022) asserts: "Supporting both learners and teachers needs through the creation of a motivational school climate thus has substantial advantages in terms of educational outcomes" (para. 6).

Finally, participants shared that the role of students would also shift within an educational structure guided by a strength-based paradigm. Learners would take on a more *active* and *collaborative* role in their own learning journeys. Barr and Tagg (1995) contend that this altered approach to learner roles represents a shift from an instruction paradigm to one focused on meaningful and authentic learning. The concept of learner autonomy finds its place within this strength-oriented paradigm shift as it emphasizes the role and responsibility of the learner rather than that of the teacher. Grabinger et al. (2007) noted that within a strength-based approach to learning, students assume more responsibilities in terms of determining their learning goals, have opportunities to apply their knowledge and strengths with their peers, and become collaborators throughout the learning process. Strength-based approaches underscore the importance of autonomy

support in terms of motivating students to internalize the relevance of learning on a more personal level, viewing learning as a *journey* or lifelong process (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001).

Area of Inquiry 8: Strategies for Educator Engagement: *Letting Go of the Curriculum-centric Focus; Process for Deep Change*

Participants indicated that the creating readiness to adopt a more strength-based view or paradigm of inclusionary education also involves the process of *letting go* of certain more set beliefs and approaches related to *Preoccupation with Gaps, Solely Curriculum-driven, Fixing Students,* or *Seeing Strengths as an Add-on.* Erikson's (2009) theory of human development includes the idea of letting go of something to receive something new. Through each of the various stages of life development, Erikson presents the notion of resolving areas of conflict, competing values or beliefs prior to progressing further in one's development. The resolution of such challenges results in greater personal development, virtues or strengths and ultimately positive outlook for the future. It is interesting to note that such virtues that emerge through life development are reflective of many positive psychology concepts found within strength-based models of development and education inclusive of hope, will, purpose, competency, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom (Vogel-Scibilia et al., 2009).

In terms of *letting go*, participants spoke in detail about the importance of broadening an educational approach that moves beyond and *letting go* of a solely curricular focus to embrace a more *holistic view* of the learner, their strengths and potential. Alignment of curriculum documents and embedding the use of strength-based language were cited as beneficial for supporting the shift closer to a child-centered model of inclusionary education. According to Stone (2020):

> Curriculum-centered philosophy and practice… typically manifests an anti-democratic, authoritarian influence, and operates in a top-down manner that de-prioritizes the agency of individual teachers and students (p. 51).

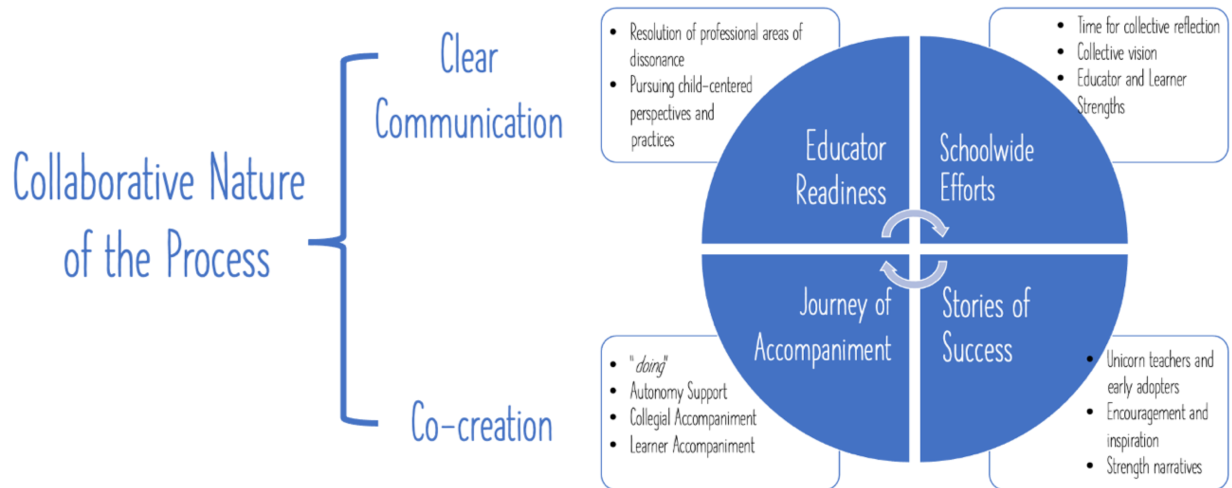
In contrast, child-centered methods embrace more autonomy-supportive methods that focus on the "motivated, interest-based, developmental learning of a child, which is rooted in constructivism and progressivism" (p. 51). Within a child-centered paradigm, educators are encouraged to be responsive to "the interests of children, respect their individual strengths and needs, foster natural curiosity, and promote cooperation" (p. 51). According to Stone (2020), recommendations for moving towards a more child-centred model of education includes enhanced opportunities for exercising agency among educators (autonomy support), leadership support and accessible professional learning related to child-centered beliefs and practices, and the development of strong-child centered professional networks that facilitate exchanges among child-centered educators.

Deliberations related to the move toward a more child-centered paradigm of education were accompanied by participants' voiced recognition of the need for a process of deep change in order for such efforts to be clarified for educators and school leadership. This insight set the stage for the final area of inquiry in which crucial aspects of a potential process for integrating greater strength-based methods within in current inclusionary classrooms and school settings were expanded upon.

Area of Inquiry 9: Call to Action: *Process for Deep Change (continued); Collaborative and Creative Actions*

Figure 21

Key Elements of the Process for Deep Change



For pursuing the process of deep change participants highlighted four key aspects that would be included in such a process. These aspects are outlined in Figure 21. The first one was educator readiness. As previously discussed, creating readiness for educators to embrace strength-based methods as part of their daily classroom interactions and routines involves, first, a shift in paradigm. As highlighted in the Discovery Phase, resolution of areas of professional dissonance reflects a shift in thinking that is closer to a child-centred view of educational practice.

The process of promoting educator readiness was seen as moving beyond individual educator perspectives, to one which engages the wider educational community in reflection and deliberations related to their current practices and visioning for the integration of strength-based methods. As Buchanan and Greig (2021) assert, embedding and sustaining changes in perspectives and practices is a process that requires sufficient

time and a collective process that involve participation among all key stakeholders. Walker and Musti-Rao (2016) indicate that *flourishing schools* prioritize and provide time for educators to collaborate in meaningful ways. Time for reflection implied having sufficient space within the daily schedule to think about and ponder how strengths could become a more focal part of instructional planning of learning experiences for students. Resulting from focus group discussions, five aspects were highlighted as essential to include in the development of a clear and shared strength-based vision:

- An awareness of student and educator strengths
- An understanding of the relevance of strengths in relation to learning and engagement
- An emphasis on relatedness (connection) in classroom relationships that facilitate knowing about and valuing the diverse strengths of individuals
- A recognition that when strengths are mobilized in educational planning and support learners feel more connected and motivated to learn, and
- A commitment to autonomy-supportive educational methods that foster creativity and innovation in learning, as well as in the development of learning strategies.

Within school districts, the development of a shared vision entails whole-school approaches where everyone is invited to be part of the process. In their conceptualization of comprehensive or whole school approaches, the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health advocates that such efforts need to consider four areas of application. Hence, the promotion of a strength-based paradigm and associated methods should be considered in planning school leadership and policies, instructional relationships with

students and learning, the social and physical environments, and partnership and services (Morrison & Peterson, 2013).

The integration of strengths within daily educational planning and learning activities is first modeled by the processes that are introduced among school staff as a result of shifting paradigms. In addition to educator readiness and schoolwide efforts as key aspects of this process, the subsequent step of enacting a strength-based paradigm by *doing it* was emphasized. Clear and open dialogue on the process of applying strengths was underscored, reinforcing the message that *"We are on a journey together."* Participants noted that the shift does not occur immediately following the presentation of strength-based concepts but rather through the process of *walking out* the paradigm together.

Considering the learning journeys of educators and students the importance of autonomy support from school leaders, and its resulting positive impact on their own motivation, confidence, and professional learning was highlighted. Harris and Muijs (2005) assert that when teachers are provided with autonomy support, they embrace a greater sense of agency, giving them the needed confidence to undertake new or innovative instructional practices that have the potential to positively shape student learning experiences. When administrators provide autonomy support for educators, they are in essence walking alongside of educators, accompanying them on their journey of learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Educators will learn from certain errors made throughout the process, but will be accompanied, supported, and encouraged by other educators at all levels. As professional accompaniment is modelled within professional relationships, educators also accompany their students on their own journeys of learning, exploring,

drawing out and engaging student strengths through autonomy-supportive methods (Haerens, 2022). In this regard educators are companions, as they *walk alongside* of students in their journey of learning. This entails roles where educators are less directive and move among students, embracing roles such as facilitator, guide, and mentor. Similarly, students demonstrate greater responsibility and autonomy for their own learning, and learning processes are informed not only by curriculum, but by the nature of students' interests, strengths, and motivations. The journey of accompaniment is essentially *doing* the process and utilizing insights from that process to continue expanding change in the direction of utilizing strengths (Mendez & Colomina, 2020; Pirard et al., 2018).

Flowing from *journeys of accompaniment* was the notion of stories of success which depicted both educators and students actively engaging strengths to reach their personalized learning goals. Stories of success were identified as positive sources of motivation and inspiration for others to undertake exploring and implementing strength-based practices. Such stories not only highlight the positive impact they have had on student learning and achievement, but also provide clarification regarding specific strength-focused approaches that might be implemented or employed as a means from which to conceive new educational applications (McCashen, 2005; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; Rashid & Louden, 2018). Within this investigation, participants identified *unicorn teachers* as those positive role models or champions who had already developed a capacity for the integration of strength-based methods within their daily educational planning and professional practice. Such individuals were viewed as inspiring and providing momentum for the rollout of a strength-based paradigm and associated

methods across school and district settings. Blood and Thorsborne (2006) refer to educational champions as those who are *early adopters of innovative ideas* that make a positive difference in their respective settings. As such individuals embrace concepts and application that they view as worthwhile, they take risks and make investments in new innovations. These individuals are usually respected groups within their professional relationships and are "*observed* and *admired* by their peers. Blood and Thorsborne describe educational champions as accountable reflective practitioners who empower others, model working relationally, and who demonstrate empathy and compassion for others – all essential skills for change agents. It is also beneficial to process the momentum of system change when school champions already occupy positions of some weight within school structures (e.g., faculty heads, house leaders, senior teachers) or are empowered by their leaders and supported in the implementation.

The implementation of a deep process of change related to the elaboration of strength-based methods (Figure 21) would need to be entrenched and strengthened by intentional collaborative activities. Such efforts were described as being bolstered by sustained clear communication and opportunities for the co-creation of pathways supporting school-wide and system level changes. Vlachopoulos (2021), in his discussion of models for creating readiness to change, affirms that effective communication of shared vision should be carried across organizations or systems. Ideally such communication should be "coherent and continuous" to ensure clarity and "reduce the risk of contradictory message" of the shared vision or paradigm (p. 3). The intent of this nature of communication is to "empowering action according to the vision" (p.3).

The second underlying collaborative action involves co-creation. Ind and Coates (2013) describe co-creation as a widely applied concept that describe a shift in system thinking where greater value is placed on the implementation of more participative processes "where people and organizations together generate and develop meaning" (p. 4). The notion of cocreation reflects a change perspective where authorship for actions is not conceived by a single authority or lone creator. In contrast, it points to the development of a culture of co-creation where meaning making, interpretation and formulated actions emerge from interaction among individuals from diverse and varied backgrounds and experiences. The process of deep change described by participants underscored the importance of a participatory process in which educators' time and effort would be dedicated to envisioning, expanding actions, experiencing the realization of strength-based methods with classrooms and schools. To some extent, Figure 21 depicts an emergent process of change having potential similarities or common aspects with other models related to change management in the literature, For example, participants' deliberations and insights gave rise to a range of themes reflective of six of the key actions Kotter delineates for successful organization change. These common elements or concepts are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8

Overlapping Process of Change

Kotter's Change Model	Integration of a Dual-dimensional Approach
- Establish a sense of urgency	- Recognition of lack of integration strength-based methods (*Professional Dissonance*)
- Form a Power Guiding Coalitions	- Role of Visionaries
- Develop a Vision - Communicate the vision	- A Shared Vison for strength-based methods (*Paradigm*)
- Empower Action according to the Vision	- School-Wide Efforts & Journey of Accompaniment (*Co-creation)*
- Plan and Achieve Short-term Wins	- Stories of Successes (*Unicorn tales*)

Destiny: Reflecting on Insights from the Discovery, Dream and Design Phases

Synthesizing Framework

Throughout the Discovery Phase of this research, the proposed dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education resonated with participants. Within their respective interviews, they spoke of the unintegrated aspects of both supports and strengths within current professional practice. Participants highlighted that since the initial introduction of an inclusive educational model, there has been significant investment and emphasis on support-oriented methods with less attention paid to the consideration of individual student strengths. They also noted that the use of strength-based methods has been

evident but largely unintegrated and disconnected from system supports or other services. There was consensus among participants regarding the need to apply strength-based methods more intentionally in inclusionary education through the further elaboration and integration of strengths in the context of student learning and engagement.

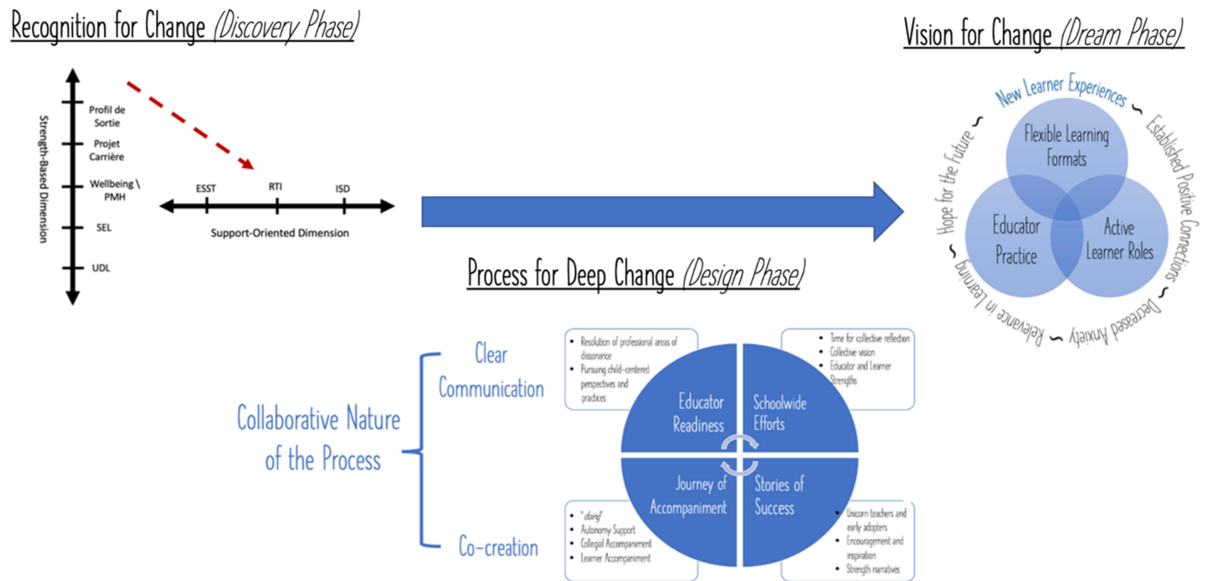
The Dream Phase provided participants with the opportunity to envision what a classroom, school, or indeed a system might look like if strength-based methods were further integrated into inclusionary educational approaches. Participants' sharing resulted in the creation of a detailed description of potential new learning experiences for students. These experiences included varied and innovative formats for learning, new and emerging roles for educators as facilitators, guides and mentors, and active student participation and small group collaborations. New learning experiences for students were also characterized by positive relationship connections, relevant learning approaches, enhanced student well-being, and hope for the future.

The subsequent Design Phase invited participants to explore key actions, structures or processes that would be critical for facilitating the realization of their vision for the creation of new learning experiences for students based on a more intentional integration of strength-based methods within inclusionary classrooms and school settings. They described a four-stage process of deep change encompassing the promotion of educator readiness, the execution of whole-school approaches, the implementation of new methods for accompanying students on their learning journeys, and the realization of narratives of success related to the application of strength-based methods. Figure 22 illustrates the synthesis of the first three phases of the AI process as an emergent

framework for the integration of strengths within a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education.

Figure 22

Synthesis of the AI Phases: An Emergent Framework for Amplifying Strengths within a Dual Dimensional Model of Inclusionary Education



The preceding framework depicting the progression from the recognition of the need to integrate strength-based methods into current practice, to a vision for new learning experiences for students, to a process for deep system change, may provide a starting point from which to begin conceiving future possibilities related to the implementation of a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education. Such an approach would move beyond support-oriented methods to further integrate strength-based perspectives and practices within inclusionary schools and classrooms. A key insight arising from this investigation relating to a dual-dimensional approach is that strength-based concepts and practices should not be viewed as add-ons but be

meaningfully incorporated and integrated into educators' paradigm of inclusionary education. With this mindset, strength-based approaches may not only be integrated with support-oriented methods, but also shape how such supports are conceived and rolled out.

Building on an Existing Framework: RtI

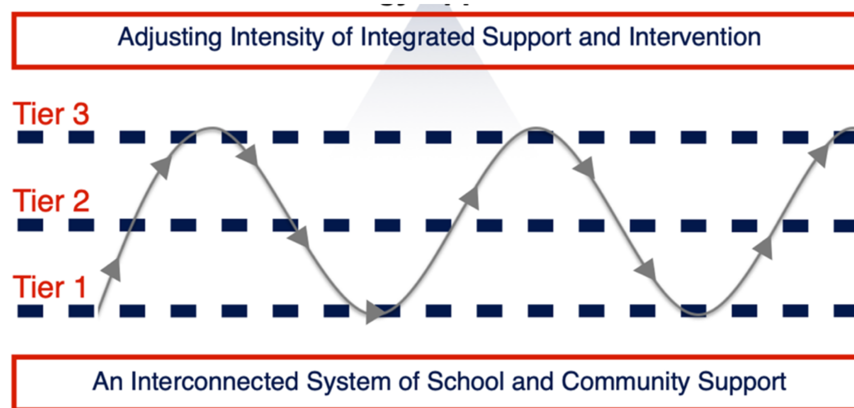
As a classroom teacher with training in exceptionalities, the conceptualization of the preceding framework arising from my investigation also prompts me to reflect on our current models that guide our thinking, educational practices, and interventions related to student learning within present inclusionary educational contexts. For example, Response to Intervention (RtI), a framework also known as the pyramid of interventions, is often applied in the defining of required learning supports and their level of intensity in terms of implementation based on assessment of students' learning needs. RtI places emphasis on early intervention of academic learning needs and behavioural concerns, and the use of data driven decision-making related to the implementation of support-oriented interventions in school settings (Fox et al., 2010; Howery et al., 2013).

This RtI framework is situated within the support-oriented dimension of a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education. Program and literature descriptions related to the overall RtI model and its three tiers do not routinely emphasize or point to the direct application of students' strengths as a contributing element in the formulation or design of learning strategies or interventions. In addition, the pyramid of intervention is presented with fixed or set boundaries, and the misappropriation of this model sometimes occurs when tiers become associated with specific groups or when students are defined by a given tier. In contrast, participants described the learning process in terms of accompanying students on their learning journeys indicating that students may

have a variety of experiences over the course of their academic development, including times when they need greater or reduced levels of support. In their adaptation of RtI, Morrison and Peterson (2015) depict the varying levels of support that may be evident for a given student over time. As students' levels of need related to their academic development varies, so in turn does the level of intensity of support required. At times, we step up with more intensive supports and at other times we step down, reducing levels of support and promoting student self-determination and interdependence. Figure 23 illustrates the three tiers of the pyramid as a more dynamic journey of learning where levels of support for student learning will vary with ebbs and flows based on varying levels of need.

Figure 23

Interconnected Continuum of Support Model



Morrison & Peterson, 2015

The perspective of accompanying students on their learning journeys shifts the focus of the pyramid of interventions from the nature of specific tiered intervention to the shaping of interventions based on the learners themselves and the nature of their learning

experiences at any point in time. To some extent, removing the boundaries of the pyramids allows educators to think more about students in terms of who they are and what they are experiencing as educators plan their strategies and interventions. The shift of planning strategies with the individual at the centre, or as a primary focus is consistent with a recovery model perspective of helping or supporting students. Recovery-oriented approaches reflect a person-centered philosophy where individuals are viewed as possessing positive attributes, strengths, and potential. In addition, this model advocates the importance of people being active and meaningful participants engaged in their journeys of personal development, exercising choice, and making decisions. Furthermore, this model focuses on individual growth potential through embracing strength-based perspectives and practices about people (Province of New Brunswick, 2013).

Integrating Strengths and Supports into Students Journey of Learning (Accompaniment)

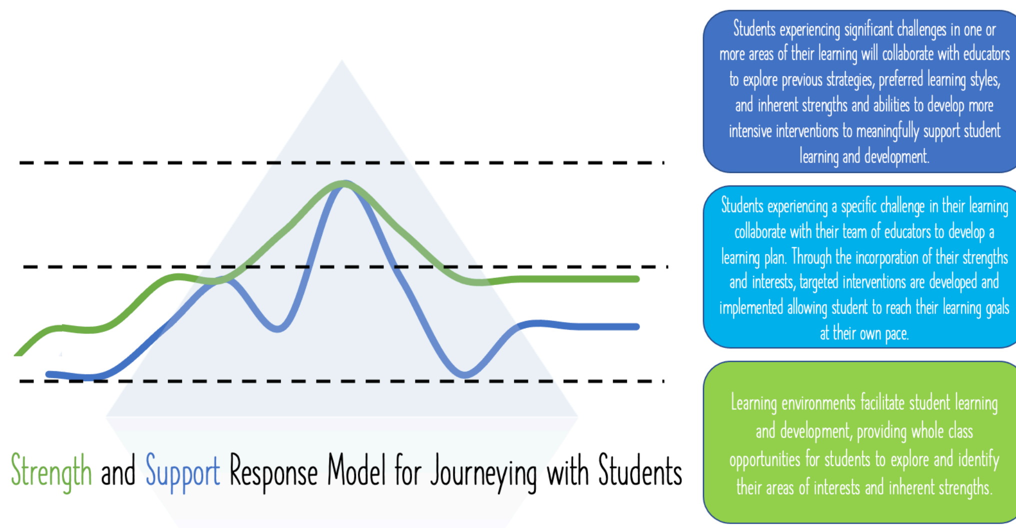
Building on the model proposed by Morrison and Peterson (2015), I have conceptualized an elaboration of this support-oriented adaptation of RtI by integrating the application of strengths as a central feature or dynamic element. This model is illustrated in Figure 24. Rather than the two dimensions being represented on intersecting vertical and horizontal axes, which could be perceived as continuing to perpetuate the perception of strengths as add-ons and further encouraging the continuation of their disconnectedness, the support-oriented and strength-based dimensions are shown to be applied in tandem, intersecting at various points and at various intensities (three tiers) over the course of students' journeys of learning and their academic development.

When considering any conceptual model within the realm of education, it is important to be continuously aware of the fact that students' lives represent a dynamic

flow and include times when they function optimally without observed concerns, and other times when they
encounter and experience periods of challenge. It is during these times of challenge or difficulty that additional support is provided in a timely fashion at the right intensity based on students' level of need. This feature of stepping up and stepping down interventions is a key aspect found within RtI and adapted models of RtI such as the Interconnected Continuum of Support Model (ICSM) (Morrison & Peterson, 2015).

Figure 24

Strength and Support Response Model for Journeying with Students



The right strengths, at the right intensity, at the right time.

While current practice within inclusionary models of education relies heavily on the early identification of student needs and the timely provision of targeted interventions, this study's proposed model encompasses the incorporation and leveraging of individuals' strengths to further support student learning and development. The conceptualization of the Strength and Support Response Model (SSRM) reframes the RtI

framework inclusive of Morrison and Peterson's model of the dynamic journey of student accompaniment, integrating into support-oriented responses a priority focus on the use of students' strengths. In a similar fashion to structuring supports for students, these strengths are applied at varying levels of intensity based on students' journeys of learning. Strengths are intertwined with support strategies shaping the nature of such efforts through increased emphasis on student engagement, motivation, and collaboration. In Figure 24, the provision of responses or strategies to student learning begins with a priority focus on exploring, understanding, and engaging strengths, heightening the *strength awareness* of both educators and students, as well as their insights into how such strengths might be applied in fostering learning and potential. This priority emphasis on strengths begins by getting to know students, who they are, their strengths and their broader inward resources for learning inclusive of interests, passions, aspirations, and motivations. Within the SSRM, the priority emphasis of students' strengths is depicted by the green line that begins prior to the conceptualization of supports and moves in tandem with support-oriented responses, shaping the nature and quality of such efforts at varying levels of intensity. In the application of the SSRM, theoretical models such as SDT proposed by Deci and Ryan (2008) and PERMA formulated by Seligman (2011) may be beneficial in guiding our exploration and application of students' strengths to support learning, as well as their academic development and well-being. Overall, envisioning strengths as an integral element or feature of an adapted RtI model may provide a unique opportunity for building on existing educational knowledge and applications and serve to support the realization of a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education. The integration of strengths as a priority focus in educational planning and intervention

development underscores the value of students' strengths and potential in relation to their learning and academic development.

The central question of this research endeavour focused on the exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences related to specific strength-based concepts and practices essential for supporting a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education. The eliciting of participants' insights was facilitated through an appreciative inquiry lens and methods encompassing a three-phase process beginning with the Describe Phase, moving into the Dream Phase, and culminating with the Design Phase. During the Describe Phase, the need for greater integration of strengths into current educational applications was highlighted, whereas the Dream Phase provided the opportunity to envision new experiences of student learning encompassing shifts in educator paradigms and roles based on strengths, more flexible learning formats, and students as active participants and collaborators on their respective learning journeys. In the Design Phase, a potential model emerged delineating key processes for the promotion and integration of strength-based methods into inclusionary educational settings. This model was described in terms of four sequential stages of change beginning with educator readiness, followed by whole-school approaches and journeys of accompaniment, and finally, stories of success. The final Destiny Phase involved my reflections on the first three phases of the AI process, conceptualizing potential frameworks that could assist in the realization of envisioned insights related to strength-based methods into current inclusionary practices. In addition, a preliminary description of the SSRM was presented as a potential means for elaborating and integrating strength-based methods within an adapted version of the current RtI model. In lieu of providing finalized answers to my preliminary research

question, I believe this research effort has illuminated potential directions for promoting, building, and embedding strengths within educational applications; however, such directions will ultimately require further introspection, research, and elaboration. Two overarching themes that were evident throughout all aspects of this research were the value that participants placed on the uniqueness of each student and their respective strengths, as well as their belief in the potential of strength-based applications to bolster student learning, motivation, and realization of successful outcomes for students. These predominant themes resonated deeply with participants, contributing to a very rich growth experience for me as an educator and researcher.

Research Limitations

Upon the completion of this research endeavour, there were certain limitations that were discovered. It is important to acknowledge that each research study consists of a degree of inherent flaws, so as to critically examine their potential impact on the study's findings (Price & Murnan, 2004). The following section will outline and address the limitations which are directly related to the research areas of inquiry.

Sample Context

This study was completed within a single provincial jurisdiction with participants being experienced educators within the New Brunswick education system. While their perspectives provided key insights into the current strength-based practices in place across the province of New Brunswick and illuminated future directions needed to further integrate these practices within everyday operation, further perspectives from educators in provinces and territories across Canada could provide additional insights and experiences related to the area of inquiry.

Lack of Additional Perspectives

Though this research investigation included a purposeful sample of educators from school, district and departmental levels who had been identified as leaders and key influencers in the development and application of inclusive educational practices, particularly as they related to innovative strength-based concepts and practices within school and classroom settings, participants were not currently in the active role of classroom teachers. While the sample size of participants was consistent with the initial proposal of having between eight to 12 participants, totaling precisely 12 at the conclusion of the data collection activities, this did not include educators who were currently in the active role of classroom teacher, nor did it include the voices of students currently in the role of engaged learner within the inclusive education system in New Brunswick. Despite the fact that much of the discussion surrounding strength-based practices outlined the importance of providing students with voice, they were not factored into the sampling for this study. While I do not believe that this lack of perspective negatively impacted the findings of the study, having the added perspective of classroom teachers and current learners within the system would certainly have added richness and provided further examples of strength-based practices and their impact on student learning to further support the adoption, integration, and ultimate embeddedness of the second, strength-based dimension within inclusionary education.

Limited Regional Scope

This study consisted of a purposeful sampling of participants from the same regional jurisdiction. Many participants shared their common experiences related to the introduction of inclusion in New Brunswick over the past several decades. The roll out of inclusion, however,

may have happened at different times utilizing varying practices and perspectives in different regions. To this end, the experiences of educators may vary from one regional jurisdiction to another. In addition, the application of strength-based practices and perspectives may vary in terms of the history of their application and how they are currently being conceptualized throughout jurisdictions. It may be beneficial for future research to be conducted in distinct regions across Canada, Western provinces, Northern territories, and Central Canada.

Future Research Potential

The findings of this research project, as outlined in the preceding results and discussion chapters of this dissertation, led to the conceptualization of a dual-dimensional model of inclusionary education consisting of both strength-based and support-oriented dimensions. Existing along an interrelated continuum representing the dynamic ebb and flow of an individual's journey, this model emphasizes the importance of not only providing appropriate supports to students at the right intensity and at the right time, but paving the way for these supports through the early identification and mobilization of individual strengths and exploration of student interests, creating the environmental conditions conducive to student growth, development, and overall flourishing. When considering future research activities that could stem from these initial findings, the next steps would be to clarify the essential structures, practices, and milestones necessary in beginning and sustaining this process of change within the system. As shared by one participant: *"There does have to be those data points as well that you're looking for. So, how do you know that you're being successful?"*

Principles of the strength-based approach (Province of New Brunswick, 2016; Alberta Education, 2013; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005) as well as the

psychological wellbeing needs of SDT (Neimeic & Ryan, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008) detail the importance of individuals having voice and choice, promoting a sense of autonomy/support. While these conditions are essential to educator and student buy in, they cannot be in place without a degree of structure. To this end, these structures need to be clarified. This is an anticipated continuation of the ongoing Destiny Phase to be completed through future research endeavours.

There is also a need to investigate the application of this model across a variety of inclusionary classroom and school contexts, looking for key indicators to determine the resulting enhancements in student motivation, achievement, and overall flourishing over a multi-year period. This future research can be done across various inclusionary contexts including all grade levels (elementary, middle school, and high school), educational programs (English Prime, French Immersion, Intensive French, etc.), as well as language contexts (Anglophone and Francophone sectors). As a French Immersion teacher with a background in Exceptionalities, I have often encountered some of the potential key indicators that could be used to determine the efficacy of this model in supporting the holistic development of learners. These could include, but are not limited to, enhanced engagement, increased motivation, improved academic achievement, sustained attendance, student, and educational staff reported positive mental health, wellbeing, and student awareness of personal strengths. This research will continue to explore strength-based practices being applied in the various contexts that contribute to the key indicators listed above as a way of enhancing learner experiences within a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education.

The ultimate hope for the findings of this research and its future potential is that it encourages and inspires continued dialogue on the system's current deficit-based approach to inclusionary education towards one that also encompasses the strengths, interests, and passions of both its students and educators. These dialogues are essential in the promotion and facilitation of shifting mindsets allowing for these practices and concepts to become integrated and embedded into daily practice. I was referred to the work of Gottlieb et al. (2012) by a fellow researcher in the field of nursing who is equally passionate about to the promotion of strengths within the fields of both nursing and education. Gottlieb (2012) notes that it is time to move beyond traditional problem-oriented relationships towards ones based on reciprocity and collaboration. Gottlieb notes that such relationships are more conducive to obtaining solution-focused results as they involve the continuous reframing of goals, roles, and responsibilities for professionals in the field. I intend to encourage further discussion of strength-based practices within the field of positive psychology and inclusionary education. I hope to begin this dissemination through professional dialogue and development as well as contributing to various academic publications within widely recognized and reputable education journals.

Personal Reflections

The process of completing this degree has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life. I have felt a full range of emotions, oscillating between frustration and motivation but never losing the determination that I would be a "*Phinisher*". When I first dove into the doctoral program four years ago, my time was always needing to be shared (sometimes unevenly) with my growing family. I reviewed

literature at the hockey rink and wrote sections of my methodology in the foyer of a dance studio. While I have enjoyed this journey through its highs and lows, my family has been the greatest support. They have provided patience, support, and encouragement, all of which has propelled me to these final words. I will close in providing some specific reflections that have occurred along the way as they pertain to my development as a researcher and academic.

I began this program wanting to explore the inclusionary model within the New Brunswick context, as this was where my own professional experiences as a classroom teacher were based. My initial, crudely crafted explanation of my research intent read something like this: *"People say that inclusion doesn't work, that there aren't enough resources. This isn't going to change so what can we do to make it work?".* With the guidance that I have received through the various mentors who have come alongside me these last four years, I was able to focus my area of study to one that was strength-based and solution-focused. Despite the specific changes in terms of the eloquence of my writing as well as the scope of my area of inquiry, I have remained consistent in my vision of improving inclusionary educational practices within the classrooms and schools to change the experiences of learners, allowing them to flourish through the identification and further development of their personal strengths. Over the course of the last four years, I have lived the findings of my dissertation, experiencing a shift in my own paradigm of practice towards one that sees the promotion of strengths, not as an add on but, as an imperative to the next step of inclusionary education.

Attending my first doctoral seminar, I remember experiencing the common signs and symptoms of imposter syndrome. While I cannot express enough the role my

supervisor played in dispelling these thoughts and building my confidence as an academic, this was a feeling that would recur often as I made my way through the various milestones of the program. I have often shared that earning this doctorate has been the hardest thing that I have done. The hard work, though, only makes sweeter the reward.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."
(Philippians 4:13)

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Appendix A - Research Information Letter

Dear Participant,

This letter describes a research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral work in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. The purpose of this research is to investigate *the current and potential use of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom settings.* These could include highlighting practices such as identifying and mobilizing student interests to support classroom learning.

You are being invited to participate in a three-stage research process following an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) research design. This process will involve three data collection events associated with the Discovery, Dream and Design Phases.

During the Discovery Phase, *individual interviews* will be carried out with participants to explore their personal experiences regarding the current use of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary educational settings in New Brunswick. For the Dream Phase, the same participants will be invited to engage in *a focus group session* to share potential innovations on how strength-based concepts and practices could be further elaborated or embedded within inclusionary schools and classroom settings. For the Design Phase, participants will have the opportunity to be part of *a second follow-up focus group session*. This event will examine how potential innovations or visions related to strength-based methods could be implemented or structured within inclusionary school and classroom settings. The anticipated time periods for these data collection events are as follows:

- Discovery Phase: Fall 2020, Individual Interviews
- Dream Phase: Winter 2021, Focus Group I
- Design Phase: Spring 2021, Focus Group II

Individual interviews and focus group sessions will be approximately 60-90 minutes in duration. Due to the current restrictions in place in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, interview and focus group sessions will be held using Zoom. To ensure a safe and secure online environment for participants, recommended security measures will be undertaken including assigning a different ID and password for each data collection event and incorporating a virtual waiting room with final admission of participants being approved by the meeting host/researcher.

Audio of individual participant interviews and focus group sessions will be digitally recorded and later transcribed for subsequent analysis. All information/data gathered from these sessions will be analyzed in aggregate form so that individual responses from participants will not be identifiable. Individual interview and focus group responses will be kept confidential. All digital information related to this investigation will be stored in password-protected files on a password-protected computer. Over the course of this study, only my supervisor and I will have access to collected information.

Although there are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this study, the final decision to take part in this research is yours. If you agree to participate now, but later have a change of mind, you may withdraw from this study at any time with no consequence. Your co-operation to take part in this study is greatly appreciated. However, there is no penalty if you do not participate, wish to refrain from answering specific interview questions, or choose to discontinue your involvement in the study altogether. Findings from this research endeavour will be shared in my final dissertation at the completion of my doctoral program. If you would like a copy and/or a summary of the findings, I will be pleased to provide you with one at the close of this research investigation.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me, Melissa Garrett at (506) 999-4426 or by email Melissa.garrett@nbed.nb.ca. If you would rather speak with someone else about this project, please contact my doctoral supervisor Dr. Bill Morrison, at (506) 238-3508 or by email wmorriso@unb.ca. You may also contact the Associate Dean of Graduate Programs at the Faculty of Education, Dr. Ellen Rose at (506) 452-6125 or by email erose@unb.ca.

Thank you for considering my request to take part in this research study. I am very pleased about your potential participation in this study and value the perspectives that you bring to this investigation.

Sincerely,

Melissa Garrett
PHD Candidate

The proposed doctoral study has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick and is on file REB-2020-XXX.

Appendix B – Research Participant Consent Form

I have read the letter explaining the purpose and procedures of this research study. I am aware that I may decline to answer specific questions or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, that only aggregate data will be reported, and that my individual responses will be kept confidential.

I consent to participating in a 60 minute individual interview on Zoom (Discovery).

yes no

I consent to participating in a preliminary focus group interview on Zoom (Dream).

yes no

I consent to participating in a follow up focus group interview on Zoom (Design).

yes no

I do not wish to participate in this study.

_______________________ _______________________ _______________________

Name Signature Date

Preferred method for communication:

Phone ______________________

Email _______________________

Appendix C - Key Informant Interview Schedule and Questions

Interview Schedule

Time Period	Research Phase	Type of Interview	Number of Participants
Fall 2020	Discovery	Individual	8-12 educators
Winter 2021	Dream	Focus Group	1 group
Spring 2021	Design	Focus Group	1 group

Guiding Interview Questions

Discovery Phase
During the Discovery Phase, individual interviews will be carried out with participants to explore their personal experiences regarding the current use of strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary educational settings in New Brunswick.

1. Could you please describe your history and experience as they relate to the field of inclusionary education and the use of strength-based practices?

2. From your perspective and those of other educational leaders, educators, and school services personnel who have shared their experiences with you, what is the relevance of strength-based practices to the creation of inclusionary learning environments?

    a. What is the relevance of strength-based practices to student learning, engagement and flourishing?

    b. Can you think of a time that you observed strength-based practices impacting the educational or classroom environment or learning experiences of students?

3. How do you apply or integrate strength-based concepts and practices within inclusionary school and classroom structures and processes?
    a. What specific types of strength-based practices have you used in your classroom or school, or have observed in use in inclusive classrooms or schools across the province?

4. What positive learning enhancements or challenges are associated with the application or integration of such concepts and practices?

a. In what ways are educators (you or the colleagues you have observed) attuned to strength-based perspectives and the use of such practices in the context of inclusive classrooms?
b. Are there barriers to the application of strength-based classrooms? How might these barriers be addressed?

Dream Phase

For the Dream Phase, the same participants will be invited to engage in a focus group session to share potential innovations on how strength-based concepts and practices could be further elaborated or embedded within inclusionary schools and classroom settings.

1. If you had a magic wand and were able to create the ideal inclusionary school or classroom that engaged strength-based perspectives and practices, what would it look like?

2. Imagine and describe the role of educators within such ideal school or classroom settings?

3. How would educators and students spend their time? What would be their role? How would they work and collaborate with other school personnel, parents or community stakeholders?

4. What key learning processes, interactions or practices would be evident? How would they be structured or organized?

5. What challenges might be experienced within such learning environments and what solutions might be developed?

6. What impacts would be evident and how would you know that these outcomes had been realized?

Design Phase

For the Design Phase, participants will have the opportunity to be part of a second follow-up focus group session. This event will examine how potential innovations or visions related to strength-based methods could be implemented or structured within inclusionary school and classroom approaches.

1. Is there anything you would add or change in the vision description emerging from the Dream Phase? (Referring to the synthesis summary from the Dream Phase)

2. What considerations would be critical for creating readiness among educators to fully embrace such a vision?

3. How would the traditional roles of educators, students and other partners change, evolve or be transformed within such settings?

4. What steps, strategic actions, changes/transformations would be necessary to move towards the fulfillment of the presented vision?

5. How would strategic actions be structured or sequenced?

6. What challenges might be encountered? How might such challenges be addressed?

7. What specific implications would there be for engaging other school and community stakeholders in preparing for such a transformation or vision?

Curriculum Vitae

Melissa Dockrill Garrett

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

2018-2022
PhD in Educational Studies, University of New Brunswick: Dissertation -*Investigating Inclusionary Classroom Practices Within a Dual Dimensional Model of Student Learning.*

2016-2018
Master of Education in Exceptional Learners, University of New Brunswick: Course work: Research in Education, Human Development and Education, Learning Exceptionalities, Assessment, Emotional-Behaviours Disorders, Creativity Design, Supervisory Methods and Resource. Capstone project on Evidence Informed Practice - *Promising Practices for Applying Pet Assisted Strategies within the Inclusive Classroom*

2008-2010
Bachelor of Education in Elementary Education (specializing in French Second Language), University of New Brunswick: Completed supervised internship and practicum at elementary level.

2003-2008
Bachelor of Arts (major in Political Science), University of New Brunswick

PROFESSIONAL LICENSES AND RECOGNITIONS

2022
Certificate Inspiring Growing Readers (completed modules), Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, New Brunswick.

2022
Certificate of French Oral Language Proficiency – Superior (C1), Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, New Brunswick.

2021
National Inclusive Education Award, Inclusion Canada, New Brunswick Association for Community Living.

2021
Teacher 5 Etoiles, Association canadienne des professionnels de l'immersion.

2018-2020
Graduation Research Assistantship, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick.

2018-2020
Graduation Teaching Assistantship, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick.

2017
WIAT-III Assessment Certification, Pearson Canada.

2010
New Brunswick Teacher's Certificate, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, New Brunswick.

ACADEMIC AWARDS

2021-2022
Dr. Althea Warren Macaulay CFUW Fredericton Scholarship, University of New Brunswick.

2020-2021
Helen MacFarlane Graduate Fellowship, University of New Brunswick.

2019-2020
Audrey Stevenson Memorial Graduate Scholarship, University of New Brunswick.

2018-2019
New Brunswick Innovation Foundation (NBIF), University of New Brunswick.

DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Courses Taught at the University of New Brunswick (UNB):
ED 5562: La littératie à l'élémentaire
ED 5563: La littératie à l'élémentaire II
ED 6166: Methods & Resource: Theory & Practice I
ED 6056: Evidence-based Practices
ED 6064: Emotional Behavioural Disorders

Courses Taught at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI):
ED 4150: The Diverse and Inclusive Classroom
ED 4150: La classe différenciée et inclusive
ED 4800: L'enseignement dans les contextes de l'immersion en français, du français de base et du français langue première en milieu minoritaire
ED 6020: Student Diversity and Inclusive Education

Courses Taught at l'Université de Moncton (UdeM) :
EDUC 3343: Difficultés et douances
EDDP 4712: Langue seconde au primaire

Course Taught at Memorial University:
ED 6925: Comment répondre aux besoins spéciaux dans une classe d'immersion française
ED 6999 : Enjeux de l'enseignement de la littératie en langue seconde

ACADEMIC GUEST SPEAKING / INVITED LECTURER

Guest Lecturer at University of New Brunswick for Bachelor of Education Students, ED 5035 – Inclusionary Practices: *Access, Engagement, and Success in Learning* (February 2022)

Guest Lecturer at University of New Brunswick for Bachelor of Education Students, ED 5035 – Inclusionary Practices: *Understanding Exceptionalities* (February 2022)

Guest Lecturer at l'Université de Moncton for Masters of Education Students : *Les Perspectives d'Inclusion* (November 2021).

EXTERNAL READER

Textbook Reviewer: Reviewed textbook for a new Canadian textbook in Inclusive Education, Solution Tree Press (2021).

RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY

Peer-reviewed Journal Publications

Garrett, M.D. (2022). Defining Inclusionary Education. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, accepted for publication.

Garrett, M.D. (2022). Applying Appreciative Inquiry to Research in the Field of Inclusionary Education. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*,

accepted for publication.

Le Bouthillier, J., Bourgoin, R. & Garrett, M.D. (2022). Le jeu symbolique au primaire en immersion française : Émotion, cognition et langue. *La revue de l'association québecoise des enseignants de français langue second*e, accepted for publication.

Professional Journal Publications

Garrett, M.D. (2022). Applying Pretend Play in Bilingual and Multilingual Classroom Settings for the Promotion of Oral Language Production. *Réflexions: Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT),* accepted for publication.

Garrett, M.D. (2022). The Role of Leadership in Promoting Strength-based Practices. *Le journal de l'immersion (ACPI*), accepted for publication.

Peer-reviewed Presentations and Seminars

Garrett, M.D. (2023). Welcome to Garrettville: Promoting Second Language Acquisition through Content-based and Learner-centred Instruction in the Elementary Classroom. Languages without Borders Conference: Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT).

Belanger-Turcotte, N., Rogers, J., Garrett, M.D., & Le Bouthillier, J., (November, 2022). Comment soutenir l'acquisition de la langue auprès des élèves débutants : pratiques gagnantes de chercheuses praticiennes de l'Institut de recherche en langues secondes du Canada. National Conference : Association canadienne des professionnelles en immersion (ACPI).

Garrett, M.D. (November, 2022). Les pratiques d'étayages inclusives pour une classe d'Immersion. National Conference : Association canadienne des professionnelles en immersion (ACPI).

Garrett, M.D. (June, 2022). Practices for Enhancing Student Engagement and Motivation in French Second Language Learning. Psychology of Language Learning Conference (PLL4).

Garrett, M.D. (May 2022). My Dissertation in Action: A Dual-dimensional Approach to Inclusionary Education in the French Immersion Setting. *Virtual Conference: The Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (ACLA/CAAL).*

Professional Presentations and Seminars

Garrett, M.D. (May 2022). Encourager les apprenants évaluatifs au niveau élémentaire.
Virtual Presentation: Professional Learning Session for Early Career French Second Language Teachers, Second Language Research Institute of Canada- L_2RIC.

Garrett, M.D. (May 2022). Investigating Inclusionary Educational Practices within a Dual-dimensional Approach to Student Learning. *Virtual Presentation: Dissertation Defense, University of New Brunswick.*

Garrett, M.D. (April 2022). Étudier les pratiques éducationnelles inclusives dans un modèle bidimensionnel d'apprentissage. *Virtual Presentation: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – Francophone Sector, Fredericton, NB.*

Garrett, M.D. (February 2022). Enseigner en programme d'immersion. *Virtual Presentation: Association canadienne des professionnels de l'immersion (ACPI).*

Garrett, M.D. (February 2022). My Dissertation in Action: A Dual-dimensional Approach to Inclusionary Education in the French Immersion Setting. *Virtual Presentation: University of New Brunswick Work in Progress Series (WIPS).*

Garrett, M.D. (February 2022). Inclusive Practices: Access, Engagement and Success in Learning. *Virtual Presentation: Inclusion Series for Pre-Service Teachers- University of New Brunswick.*

Garrett, M.D. (February 2022). Les pratiques de l'étude de mots au niveau élémentaire. *Virtual Presentation: Professional Learning Session for Early Career French Second Language Teachers, Second Language Research Institute of Canada- L_2RIC.*