LEADERS OF STUDENT GROWTH:

A LOOK AT THE IN-SCHOOL TEAM STRUCTURE IN ONTARIO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the in-school team (IST) structure found within Ontario public elementary schools. The IST is a problem-solving approach implemented to support students, especially those identified as experiencing difficulties within schools. Five elementary principals were interviewed for this research and it is through their voices that deeper understandings about ISTs are shared. Five case studies are included to highlight the experiences of these leaders as they implemented the IST within their schools.

This research has many layers within it. It sits within holistic education to emphasize the importance of teaching the whole child, not just addressing his or her mind in isolation from his or her body, heart, and spirit. At the school level, a holistic and inclusive mindset are integral to the implementation of efficient and ethical ISTs within schools.
At the societal level, the figured worlds theoretical framework is used to problematize some of the more covert implications of the IST on students experiencing difficulties. This is where identity construction comes into question within this work because it calls educators to be reflective about the practices and discourses they use when attempting to help students who may be struggling.

Likewise, this study highlights the need for holistic practices to be implemented when intervening to help students. In addition, limits of this study are discussed, some suggestions for improvements are provided, as well as, implications for future research.

Keywords: holistic education, students experiencing difficulties, in-school team, school structures, leadership, administration, special education, inclusive education, figured worlds
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my paternal grandmother: Misako Jean Kumabe. You taught me the importance of kindness, the strength that comes from never giving up, and the courage to always be my best self.
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<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder</td>
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<td>AODA</td>
<td>Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act</td>
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<td>ASD</td>
<td>Autism Spectrum Disorder</td>
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<td>COP</td>
<td>Challenge of Practice</td>
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<td>DBDM</td>
<td>Data-Based Decision Making</td>
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<td>DBST</td>
<td>District-Based Support Teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
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<td>DECE</td>
<td>Designated Early Childhood Educator</td>
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<td>DI</td>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
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<td>EA</td>
<td>Educational Assistant</td>
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<td>EDI</td>
<td>Early Development Indicators</td>
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<td>EIS</td>
<td>Early Intervention Services</td>
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<td>ELL</td>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
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<td>EQAO</td>
<td>Education, Quality, and Accountability Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETFO</td>
<td>Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario</td>
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<td>IDEA</td>
<td>Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)</td>
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<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individual Education Plan</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
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<td>ILST</td>
<td>Institutional-Level Support Teams</td>
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<td>IPRC</td>
<td>Identification, Placement, and Review Committee</td>
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<td>IST</td>
<td>In-School Team</td>
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<td>ISTM</td>
<td>In-School Team Meeting</td>
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<td>LD</td>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
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<td>MID</td>
<td>Mild Intellectual Disability</td>
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<td>MRP</td>
<td>Major Research Paper</td>
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<td>OMOE</td>
<td>Ontario Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>PQP</td>
<td>Principal’s Qualification Program</td>
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<td>PS</td>
<td>Public School</td>
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<td>RtI</td>
<td>Response to Intervention</td>
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<td>SEA</td>
<td>Special Equipment Amount</td>
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<td>Special Education Resource Teacher</td>
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<td>SIP</td>
<td>School Improvement Plan</td>
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<td>SSC</td>
<td>Student Support Centre</td>
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<td>TDSB</td>
<td>Toronto District School Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>UD</td>
<td>Universal Design</td>
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<td>YRDSB</td>
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“To be nobody-but-yourself-in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody-else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

- E.E. Cummings.

The Ontario provincial government passed the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) in 2005. The mandate of this act is to make Ontario accessible by 2025. Across this province, workplaces and schools are to comply with this act by making their spaces more inclusive to all people of varying abilities. The creation of this act acknowledges that there is work to be done in the area of inclusion across Ontario.

Within Ontario schools, there is a movement towards inclusive education. It almost goes without saying that teaching students as if they are all the same is problematic. At the school level, students, identified with formal disabilities or not, experience barriers to their learning. To reduce these barriers, strategies such as universal design (UD) and differentiated instruction (DI) are implemented.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (OMOE) (2010) defines universal design as a: “… teaching approach that focuses on using teaching strategies or pedagogical materials designed to meet special needs to enhance learning for all students, regardless of age, skills, or situation” (p. 59) and defines differentiated instruction as a “… method of teaching that attempts to adapt instruction to suit the differing interests, learning styles, and readiness to learn of individual students” (p. 57).

Over the last several decades, especially within liberal democracies, there has been a
growing awareness of the need to create a culture of inclusion. Pedagogies that encourage more organic learning, and that address the needs of the individual learner, are coming to the fore, as educators begin to realize that a ‘one size fits all’ instructional model has no validity in a modern learning environment in all its complexity and diversity.

I am using the term ‘inclusive education’ broadly within this work. According to Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009), inclusive education is defined as “[e]ducation that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (p. 6). In 2006, educator George Dei said, “Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone” (OMOE, 2009, p. 6)

When students experience difficulties in school, whether it is because of personal learning needs or environmental barriers to access, a strategic plan is required to support students to move forward successfully. There are a number of types of resources and supports that are available to help these students. The in-school team (IST) is one example of a structure in place within public schools to help students who may be experiencing difficulties to make gains in their learning. The practices of the IST need to be inclusive, equitable, and ethical because those that are not are almost certain to hinder rather than help students.

In Caring and Safe Schools (2010), the IST is defined as:

A school-based team that suggests teaching strategies to classroom teachers who have students with special education needs and that recommends formal and informal assessments. An in-school support team is made up of people with various types of expertise who work together. In most schools, the core members of the team would include the principal or vice-principal; the school special education resource teacher (if available); a guidance teacher-counsellor
(especially at the secondary level), and possibly the student’s current teacher and/or ‘referring’ teacher. When appropriate, the team may also include representatives from the school board and/or community (OMOE, p. 58).

The IST is essentially a “student support team” established to help students “experiencing difficulty to succeed in the learning environment” (OMOE, 2001, p. C6).

ISTs are comprised of many team members, consisting of some or all of the following: the principal, vice-principal, special education resource teacher (SERT), classroom teacher, speech and language pathologist (SLP), psychologist, occupational therapist, or physical therapist (OT/PT), social worker, teacher assistant, and parents (OMOE, 2001). These members are seen as the school think tank, meant to brainstorm, implement, and access all the necessary next steps to help a student move forward.

So how then do educators come to implement the IST structure within their schools? Throughout this study, I will explore this and other questions as I delve deeper into this barely documented practice found within Ontario schools, to uncover a better understanding of all that goes into using this team to help with student growth, achievement, and well-being.

The IST may be an example of a holistic pedagogical structure existing within the public education system. It is holistic in that it acknowledges that students are not simply intellectual entities, but also are physical, emotional, and spiritual beings, and that educators need to acknowledge and consider all these elements when determining how to best support students on an ongoing basis.

The IST is an agent of problem-solving used to discuss how to support students experiencing difficulties. When effective, the IST is a space where people come together to
explore how a given student is doing at a particular time, and to design an action plan of next steps to help that student make future gains. In this sense, the IST can be likened to a net designed to catch students from falling behind. When the IST is not effective, for instance when the structure is fractured in some way, it is difficult for students to receive the support they need.

**BACKGROUND TO THIS RESEARCH**

As a practicing elementary school teacher, this study is a culmination of the many wonderings I have had in my career to this point. This work is dear to my heart and my soul. In some ways, writing this thesis has been a cathartic release of the uneasiness I have felt within my own practice. In other ways, it is a search for validation. I am so blessed to have the opportunity to do this doctoral-level research on this topic about which I feel so passionate.

While teaching grade one, a fellow colleague from another school spoke to me about one of her students, Mona¹, who was discharged from a reading program called ‘Reading Recovery’. This program, an expensive one, given the amount of training and time invested into it, is meant to be intensive support for students who need help with their reading and writing.

Mona came to grade one as a non-reader. From September to November, she made some gains in her reading growth, and reached a level 5 based on standardized reading scores. Since she plateaued at this reading level, and was no longer making gains, she was discontinued from the program. Her teacher was told that this was because she stopped making gains and that other students would benefit more from her coveted spot in this program.

After hearing about Mona, I started to think deeply about this practice within schools. I

¹ ‘Mona’ is a pseudonym, as are all the names of students, teachers, and principals, in order to preserve confidentiality.
understand the rationale behind Mona being discharged. I see why ‘the numbers’ want Mona out of the program, and I can also see how another student would benefit from Mona’s spot in the program. But what about Mona? She is a real person with real needs. And in reality, she struggles with reading each day and will continue to struggle; the one program that was helping her and upon which she really depended on was removed. My frustration with this is that it seems grossly unfair. This is an example of a fractured program in that it does not help all of the students who need help.

What is next for Mona? Simply put, the IST will have to support her needs moving forward. But what happens if this structure is fractured itself during implementation? Mona was on a growth plan for her reading, writing, and mathematical needs. She was on this growth plan since the fall. A growth plan is an agreement between teachers, students, and families to work together on areas of concern.

On Mona’s progress report in November, she was having difficulty across all subject areas. In ‘Ministry language’ on her provincial progress report it read: “…progressing with difficulty.” On her term-one report card, she received a lot of Cs and Ds. Grade one is hard for her both academically and socially. She does not understand social situations very well either. She often requires a lot of support to problem solve issues with her peers when they arise.

If the IST is supposed to help her, this needs to happen holistically so that students like her do not fall through the cracks. Her classroom teacher requested an IST meeting at the beginning of December. By February, no meeting date had been set. To hear this from my colleague made me sad. Why the wait? When this meeting occurred, Mona was placed on a list to receive an academic assessment in grade two. At her school, there is a waitlist for testing.
In bureaucratic terms, this means that once this testing is done, if she needs further assessments, she will have to wait to get a psycho-educational assessment from our school psychologist, and then following this testing an identification that allows for additional support, such as an Individual Education Plan (IEP), can be put in place. As a teacher, and a researcher in the area of ISTs, I do not like this projection for her because I know learning is difficult for her. Whereas for the most part, her classmates learn and retain concepts at a steady pace, she does not retain them.

Contenta (1993) points out, “In grade 1, it’s not uncommon for children to be placed in reading groups with names like ‘the bears’ and ‘the tigers’ to separate the slower readers from the faster ones” (p. 97). As someone who has taught grade one, I know that grouping students by abilities happens. I know that there were times where I sorted my students by their reading levels, and placed them in groups based on those levels. This is called homogenous groupings, where all the students are the same. However, there were also times when I sorted students in heterogeneous groupings where they worked with students from differing reading levels.

Ability grouping, like many classroom practices, can be seen as problematic at times, and sometimes may be considered a form of streaming. As educators we have to be careful of how we sort students, because we sometimes do not know the extent to how it helps or hinders these students. Practices that stratify students are dangerous.

Another colleague of mine shared his experiences with me regarding his student named Freddy, who was also in grade one at the time. Freddy is generally sad, or at least this is how he describes himself. In January, he wrote in his writer’s notebook that he wanted to die. He then questioned the point of life during guided reading one day. His teacher talked with his mom
about these statements because it is important to involve the families of students this young, so that support happens seamlessly between home and school.

Freddy was placed on a growth plan for his social and emotional needs in October. The IST meeting for him happened in November. His mother was present. From this meeting, Freddy’s action plan was to make new friends and to complete classwork on time. I heard that he made some gains with these goals, but was still depressed. His teacher describes him as a sensitive boy, who truly struggles in a normal classroom setting.

When Freddy spoke about death in class, Freddy’s classroom teacher communicated concerns about him to the school vice-principal, the special education teacher, and the school psychologist. No one initially responded to this teacher, so he asked for another IST meeting to discuss Freddy’s next steps, and get the intervention team involved. This help from fellow colleagues moved in slow motion, and left this classroom teacher to handle this situation on his own. Upon hearing this story from my colleague, I was frustrated to learn that support for this student was implemented so slowly.

These situations encouraged me to consider the importance of effective structures within schools, and the important role principals play in maximizing the effectiveness of these structures. The more I delved into my research, the more it became apparent to me how essential principals are in the implementation of school structures, and most especially the IST.

Regarding Mona: the IST determined next steps for her. She falls under the umbrella of special education to support her with her learning needs. In the meantime, while she waits for support, her learning gaps continue to get bigger. As for Freddy, the IST will continue to monitor him. The support he receives falls on his classroom teacher, but it goes without saying that one
person cannot do it all.

For some students, school is often the best part of their day. It is where they get to see their friends, where they get to learn new things, and where they have many new experiences different from what they would have at home. However, there are those students, like Freddy and Mona, for whom school is a challenging place. When I reflect on my teaching practice, especially knowing that students like Mona and Freddy exist, I sometimes wonder how the work that I do as a teacher is helping or hindering student growth. I also wonder how my work as a researcher can help students.

Within schools, the IST is made up of various educators and professionals who seek to problem-solve on the best ways to support students who are experiencing difficulties. The work of this structure becomes particularly problematic when the supports implemented hinder rather than enable opportunities for the whole child to be supported and to grow. This present study aims to explore, through the voices of principals, how the IST structure within elementary schools is helping or hindering students.

It is important to point out that, in this analysis, I cannot disregard the impact that the IST may or may not have on students in more long-term and profound ways. ISTs are built upon the premise that they are a structure meant to support students. As would be the case with any practice, I find value in being reflective on the work I do as an educator, and on its long-term consequences on those with whom I work..

A part of being reflective is looking at how the IST may or may not impact student identity. The concept of identity is one that is layered with complexity. Research over the last several decades indicates that identity is a construction that is socially mediated, fluid, and
dynamic (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). If identity is created and formed by a person’s interaction with the world, then these interactions are important with regard to how students see themselves and come to be seen by others within the school structure.

To ensure that each student receives appropriate attention, so that his or her needs are met, an authentic space for engaged dialogue about students’ strengths, needs, and interests is essential. This intentional engagement is one that is facilitated by the IST structure. It is a place where multiple voices can be shared, heard, and where remediation strategies can be mapped out. Over the course of this dissertation, I intend to show that, when used effectively, the IST has the capacity to facilitate holistic and positive gains for students.

I will examine how a more connected IST structure at the elementary school level is the best way to support each student. Connected ISTs are those that employ a holistic framework that is mindful, conscious, authentic, equitable, inclusive, and whole. The purpose of education, in its broadest sense, is to foster the whole person. Likewise, the goal of ISTs should be to support the whole person. This is at the heart of an inclusive education.

**Research Questions, Purpose, and Rationale**

Through some of the wonderings mentioned, and many more I will explore going forward, I landed on my research questions. For this study, I wanted to explore good practices of principals implementing ISTs, so I attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of five public elementary principals who implement a holistic IST structure at their schools to support students who are experiencing difficulties?
2. How did five principals get their staff to assume a holistic and shared responsibility for students experiencing difficulties?
3. How did these principals use a holistic IST structure to shift staff thinking about students experiencing difficulties?

Principals were selected as the participants for this study because they are the highest level of leadership within schools. That said, I do not wish to in any way devalue the many leadership roles that teachers also take on within schools or to not acknowledge their pivotal role within the IST structure. But I made the decision early on in my research that including teacher voices would be too unwieldy and therefore outside the scope of this work.

My intention over the course of this thesis is to look at the intersection of the IST structure with students. This interaction between students (specifically those experiencing difficulties in schools) is worthy of in-depth investigation because this in-school structure holds a lot of decision-making power in terms of the support students do or do not receive. This work is a call for educators to think about and question how ISTs can support students in holistic, equitable, and inclusive ways. The way students are framed within this structure directly impacts the effectiveness of the intervention.

Hostetler (2005) summarizes the reason why we research. He writes, “We need to think about how we can make life better for people” (p. 21). He further goes on to say, “Serving people’s well-being is a great challenge, but it is also our greatest calling” (p. 21). I think this makes clear why I do research. I want my work to help educators help students to become their best selves.

As a practicing elementary teacher involved with ISTs for many students labeled as experiencing difficulties, I often feel uneasy about the work that I do with these students. The reason for this is because every decision I make, or do not make, for that matter, regarding the
progress of an individual student, has an impact on that particular student moving forward.

I think that as educators, as people who have devoted their lives to working within the educational field, we have a responsibility to think critically about the work that we do: we need to make sure that it is inclusive, equitable, and ethical. For much of the start of my teaching practice, I did not question things; I simply did what I was told; I was still learning what was good practice and what was not. But there were moments when I doubted what I was doing. There is something to be said about acknowledging the feeling that “something isn’t right”. Over the years, I have come to learn to listen to my intuition more – that inner voice of knowing.

Throughout the beginning of my career, I felt like I did not have the language to articulate what I was feeling and thinking. My doctoral studies have since given me the words to be able to say some of the things that my heart wanted to express about education. I also have felt like I have not had the power to say things. So many power dynamics exist within school boards, and within the various affiliations, such as teachers’ unions, in which teachers find themselves. This all has to be factored into the questioning that we do, in the name of trying to teach from within.

My point is that I want my work to call people to think differently about how the structures they implement within their schools and their teaching practices are helping or hindering students in their care. I want practitioners to be reflective of the work that they do, and to question themselves and others when things just do not feel right. It takes a lot of courage to be an educator within the public system. Empowering our teachers will ultimately help to empower our students.

It is my hope that my research will encourage more holistic and ethical IST structures
within public elementary schools. I present five case studies highlighting the voices of five elementary school principals who implement the IST within their schools. I wish to highlight two considerations that support this motion for holistic and balanced approaches to supporting students experiencing difficulties within schools:

1. Comprehensive team approaches are required for the problem-solving and decision-making necessary to move students towards making positive gains at school.

2. Traditional schooling that disregards the whole child (mind, body, heart, and soul) is outdated. Structures and practices that foster the whole child are needed to ensure that students are set up for success moving forward with their lives.

I am very much personally engaged in this study. I want to be involved in work that helps my students become the best version of themselves. I readily admit that this notion is in and of itself a contentious issue: the ‘best version’ of any given individual is inherently subjective. The larger meta-narrative upon which our school system is structured is that it is essential to mold students to become active, successful participants in the global economy.

Educator Paulo Freire wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In this text, he discusses the banking model of education. In this model, he describes the failings of a system when students are treated like containers to be filled with information passed on to them from their teachers (Freire, 2010, p. 72). Essentially, information is deposited into students, like money gets deposited into banks.

This far too common traditional form of schooling is outdated because there is a growing need for schooling to be more than simply training students for future vocations, that, given rapid technological changes, may or may not exist by the time they graduate. For example, there is a
movement towards more automation of jobs, which could essentially remove “large numbers of middle class jobs” (Autor, 2015, p. 3). As educators, it is important to keep in mind that, “Changes in technology [will] alter the types of jobs available and what those jobs pay” (Autor, 2015, p. 5).

In other words, students cannot be seen as containers to be filled with content, but rather they need to be taught in more holistic ways so that their entire beings are reached and fulfilled by current day education, so that they are ready for their futures. Consequently, I want to give the students I teach the chance to explore who they are and to develop their own sense of what they want to accomplish over the course of their lives. I understand this to be a lifelong process. I want my students to be unafraid to take chances, and to be vulnerable, without being held back either by the people they interact with, or the structures and processes that are in place.

I believe that the topic I chose to study is important because this work attempts to synthesize different schools of thought. Our public school system is not one that can be considered holistic; in truth, it is neoliberal in its make-up (Joshee, 2012). By my definition, neoliberalism within schools expresses itself through privatization of learning and financial cutbacks to staffing and resources, thus constraining a truly public education. If neoliberal ideas are at the heart of the pervasive ideological model within the system, this system cannot consider itself holistic.

As a public educator, it is important to be critical of neoliberal ideas found within our corporate-driven world, especially as it seeps into education (Joshee, 2012). The inequities often associated with privatization and fiscal cutbacks could create deep fractures amongst learners within our province.
The intersection of the entrenched neoliberal system and holistic pedagogy is not a
natural or comfortable one. In a system that is embedded in a culture steeped in a neoliberal
worldview, holistic pedagogy stands to dilute it. This dilution comes in the form of educators
helping students reach their full potential, – cognitively, affectively, physically and spiritually –
using the support mechanisms specifically developed to support the whole child.

A quick word about the use of terms: whenever the word ‘educator’ appears in this work,
I am referring to both administrators and teachers. If the word ‘administrator’ is used,
it is referring to both principals and vice-principals. That said, it is important to state that names and
titles should not matter when it comes to helping students.

**Positionality**

Positionality is an important component to qualitative research because it is important for
the reader to understand where the researcher is coming from. Conceptualizing my place within
this research is an important starting point to this dissertation. How I self-identify is important
because it frames my positionality on my research. Alcoff (1988) explains positionality as the
markers of relational positions (Maher & Tetreault, 1993, p. 118). Such markers as gender, race,
and class make up people’s identities and play a role in how they relate to certain contexts

For this research, I choose to self-identify as a Japanese Canadian, a female PhD
candidate, and an elementary school teacher within the Ontario public school system. I think
these three aspects of my identity inform how I approached my research.

I believe deeply that the internment years during World War II hold significance to the
family histories of many Japanese Canadians. Eckhart Tolle (2005) speaks about pain-bodies as
“an accumulation of old emotional pain” (p. 140). He postulates that nations and races hold collective pain-bodies based on events that have happened to them.

During the war, my grandparents were interned. They were Canadian-born citizens, who, at the hands of their own Canadian government, were literally separated from their homes and families. Men were sent to work camps, while women and children were left behind at the internment bases. Schooling, which in Canada is supposed to be a right, not just a privilege, stopped for them.

I believe this is important to mention because I think knowing this about my family history makes me sensitive to many fragmentations within schools. The physical removal of Japanese Canadians from their homes and schools saddens me profoundly. These days, the physical segregation of students based on traits that they cannot change or control, seems like something out of a history book. As educators, it is important to reflect on how our practices and decisions through the traditional and hidden curricula perpetuate disconnections rather than connections.

Within a classroom, students learn appropriate values, beliefs, and behaviours through the hidden curriculum. Smith Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan (2004) write, “The hidden curriculum refers to the set of rules or guidelines that are often not directly taught but are assumed to be known” (p. 5). The hidden curriculum can arise within IST meetings as well. There are subtle nuances that exist within these meetings and amongst team members that affect the overall direction of any discussions.

I was raised in a family with two different religions. My father’s side of the family is Buddhist and my mother’s side is Christian. My paternal grandparents were practicing Buddhists
and I saw many traditions in their home that I see in retrospect helped shape my value system. I would argue that many Buddhist practices are very similar to many of present-day holistic practices and beliefs. Lee, Hong and Niemi (2014) make a similar claim that holistic educational philosophy is similar to Eastern value systems (p. 872).

I became interested in academic research during my master of teaching program, where I had to write a major research paper (MRP). It was the beginning of my work in learning to question and be reflective of my teaching practices, and to use data from the field to further inform the work that I was doing as a teacher. After four years away from academia, I decided to return to the PhD program. It was a calling. Getting accepted was bittersweet: I knew I wanted nothing more than to be a student again, but I also knew that signing on for a terminal degree would mean a lot of sacrifices.

For the past nine years, my vocation has been as an elementary teacher. In my nine years of teaching, I have already experienced strike action twice: once under the tenure of Dalton McGuinty’s government, and once during Kathleen Wynne’s tenure.

As an Ontario elementary school teacher, I have attended several IST meetings. I did not receive formal training on how to be a member of IST meetings, and so learning my roles and responsibilities was gained through experience. A strong driving force behind this research is my personal desire to want to know how other schools and teams make the IST structure function effectively within their schools.

I acknowledge that I bring biases to this work. As a lover of learning, and as an elementary teacher within a public school board, I come with a passion for education. This passion has always made me a successful student and an effective teacher. So then why would I
even try to be the voice of students experiencing difficulties? Precisely because I was and am a good student, I have a deep sense of discipline and incredible work habits. I am a perfectionist, hard-working, and always willing to put in the extra effort to stand out. But learning has not always been easy for me.

I remember back to elementary and high school math; I remember thinking, “Why is everyone else able to understand this and not me?” In high school, I took subjects in which I was more proficient to get the marks that I needed to get into university. Essentially, I learned to navigate the system by streaming myself to take specific courses that gave me the marks to get further ahead.

I believe many of my difficulties with math might be traced back to the ineffective math teachers I had. They taught to students who understood, and left the others behind. I remember back to the time when I was trying to learn to drive: Why did I have a mental block towards being able to do this? My main obstacle was my own fear: I was terrified to drive. It was not until I found the right driving instructor that I was truly able to make gains in my learning and gain confidence in my ability to drive. Teachers wield so much power: they can so easily open and close doors to learning by their attitudes and behaviour.

My point is that we all struggle. I may be completing my dissertation, but it has not been easy. How can we make things a little bit easier for students, so that they do not have to experience struggles that make them feel less about themselves? I understand that it is the collectivity of our experiences, good or bad, that build our characters. I would not be where I am today without all the highs and lows of life; however, it has always been my network of support that has pulled me through the more challenging phases. We need to make sure all students feel
like they have a network to lift them up, when they do not know how to do so on their own.

**Overview of Thesis**

In Chapter two, I examine the issues, theories, and research that frame this work. This is where I explore how fragmentations within schools is a problem that when looked at through a critical lens, gives way for the need to have more holistic and inclusive structures and practices within schools which would allow all students to feel more connected and supported.

In Chapter three, I share the context, methodology, and data sources of this study. I discuss the blending of modified grounded theory with case study as a hybrid design for this work. In Chapter four, I present five case studies of each of the principals I interviewed. In Chapter five, I discuss the findings, highlighting significant themes that emerged from the data. In Chapter six, I provide final thoughts on some implications and recommendations for elementary schools, concluding with strengths, limitations, and a discussion of potential future research.
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH ISSUES AND FRAMEWORK

“What do we live for, if not to make life less difficult for each other?”

- George Eliot.

This chapter reviews the literature, issues, research, and theories that inform this work. I intend to provide the theoretical framework for the position that I am taking with regard to the role of ISTs, and what elements can be used to make them comprehensive in improving student performance, attitudes, and general well-being.

This study questions how the IST structure helps and/or hinders students experiencing difficulties in schools. Currently, there is little research on ISTs by this name, which has made it difficult to find additional studies on this topic. In this sense, this work sits at the fringe of contemporary research. This newness requires authentic and conscious investigation as to what is happening when students experiencing difficulties intersect with the IST structure.

The purpose of this section is to review the issues that inform this study, situate this work within sociocultural theories of learning and identity, and then discuss how these issues and theories informed the research questions for this investigation. Going forward, this work attempts to synthesize relevant issues with emerging ideas around this topic.

**Review of Holistic Education**

As I specified in the previous chapter, I am doing my analysis from the perspective of a holistic educator: I do not view education as a solely intellectual exercise. In other words, I do not view learning or identity as static entities that are only of the mind. Holistic pedagogy acknowledges that it is essential for educators to address all the dimensions of the whole child:
mind, heart, body, and spirit. It also needs to address the environment in which the child is situated and the people with whom the child interacts. By extension, I do not view the sole purpose of ISTs as to simply improve the academic performance of the students within this structure.

Holistic educational pedagogy is used as a set of principles for what I believe education should and could look like. This body of reasoning describes the fragmentations within schools among students who are labeled as experiencing difficulties. Experiencing difficulties can look like many different things. Perhaps, there is a student who is not making reading gains like Mona, or a student who is emotionally distraught like Freddy, or something else. These are the children that need more help: they need someone, a caring adult perhaps, to care enough to support them.

Holistic education is the process by which “…various dimensions of the teacher and student are honored and nurtured in educational settings and process” (Mayes & Williams, 2013, p. vii). It comes from the theory that if any aspect of an individual’s being is ignored, it will become ill, out of balance, or fragmented (Mayes & Williams, 2013, p. vii). For example, in traditional Chinese medicine, there is the belief that health comes when all systems are in balance (Mayes & Williams, 2013, p. vii). From this perspective, disease is a result of imbalances. Mayes and Williams (2013) argue that in a large number of cases, it is not the students who are out of balance but rather the education system (p. viii). This is something to ponder as we explore this study.

Holistic professor Jack Miller (2006) writes, “Holistic education is an approach aimed at teaching the whole person” (p. 101). The holistic curriculum is one in which various
relationships are conceptualized to bring about connections. Making connections provides a means of moving away from fragmentation (J. Miller, 2007, p. 13). The six connections that Miller (2010) discusses are: (1) linear thinking and intuition, (2) relationship between mind and body, (3) relationships among domains of knowledge, (4) relationship between self and community, (5) relationship to the earth, and (6) relationship to the soul (p. 13–14).

Woven into the curriculum, these types of connections have the potential to transform teaching and learning. When integrated into IST meetings, these types of connections have the ability to change how members view the students being discussed, given that the focus becomes about much more than just academic gains or gaps; it focuses on all the realms of a student’s human landscape.

In 1993, holistic educator Ron Miller edited *The Renewal of Meaning in Education: Responses to the Cultural and Ecological Crisis of Our Times*. In this book, he states: “Education today needs a new vision, a new understanding of its fundamental purposes. In order to move out of the crisis we are in, it is not enough to ‘restructure’ the system already in place; educators must radically examine their underlying assumptions and convictions about the nature and purpose of schooling, for these are stale remnants of a simpler time” (p. 8).

He further goes on to say, “We need now to deconstruct the socially/culturally produced meanings of ‘education,’ ‘school,’ and ‘teaching’” (R. Miller, 1993, p. 8). In other words, there is value in questioning what is the purpose behind education, schooling, and teaching. Education works within a larger social and cultural context, and thus practices and structures that exist within it require constant awareness, negotiation, and mediation as to where they fit in the larger
system. Deconstruction gives way to critical and conscious awareness of how education helps or hinders other pieces to this larger system.

J. Miller (1993) writes: “Holistic education, then, is not child-centered but child-connecting. Through holistic education the child is connected to knowledge, community, the environment, and to the cosmos” (p. 65). When education is viewed as connections between the child and other systems and structures, it makes apparent the interconnections that exist between all humans and the larger world.

Michael Apple (2013) highlights a problem associated with holistic pedagogy. He points out that with the inclusion of more attributes added to the academic curriculum, in an attempt to teach the whole child, there exists more attributes for students to be stratified. For example, there is a strong movement towards promoting student mental health within schools. Although a timely and relevant component in the evaluation of students, the addition of this focus does create more pieces upon which students are now informally or formally being assessed.

In other words, alongside the curriculum are these additional attributes that students are now to be judged against. These alternative expectations might target a student’s mental health or social emotional learning. When this happens, new targets are set out for students to achieve, thus creating more components for students to be marked up against. This can be problematic, especially for students who are already experiencing difficulties reaching already determined goals.

In the IST context, is important to look at a whole picture of the student when determining next steps. As a consequence, a student's mental health is always discussed, at some level, within meetings about students experiencing difficulties. However, more often than not,
students who are experiencing difficulties in their academics are also experiencing difficulties in some other area of their life. We are whole people, after all.

In the Waldorf education system, in order to build a sense of family and community, students and teachers are kept together from grade one to grade eight. This organization is meant to build deep connections and relationships amongst all members of this group. In Finland, a similar model is used (Sahlberg, 2012). These examples show that the consistent relationships over time among students and teachers of a school community have a positive impact on the development of all parties. The benefit of this structural set-up is that members of the community come to care about the well-being and success of the entire community.

Recently, the education systems in Finland and Singapore have received a lot of positive attention for the high international ranking of their students on benchmark tests like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Lee, Hong, and Niemi (2014) argue that the educational success of these two nations comes from their focus on holistic education. These countries are concentrating not just on academic performance, but rather on working to “…develop well-rounded citizens with upright character and grounded values” (p. 872). These two countries are only two examples of places that have noticed that something more is required within their education system to support the whole student to be successful.

The root of the problem may be that teaching in fragmented ways hinders student development. For example, only teaching to students who understand concepts quickly and leaving behind others. Such fragmentations may be counteracted by simple adjustments to practice. Holistic practices can come in many forms within the school system, but perhaps, one way to ensure that we are supporting the whole child is to use holistic frameworks. My data
collection explores this.

Traditional methods of teaching, such as rote learning where memorization and repetition are the standard way to retain information, may discredit and devalue students who are not able to work within these old and outdated practices. This form of teaching might cause students to struggle, if they are unable to conform to this teaching style. The IST structure has been specifically developed to help these types of students - the ones who struggle with learning in traditional modalities.

ISTs work on the belief that all students can learn, with the right mechanism put in place to help them. That said, the IST structure must determine how to support students in holistic and ethical ways. The IST structure must be understood as one component of the much larger hierarchical structure of the school, the school board, the Ministry of Education, and the larger societal structure in which all of these are embedded.

The ‘industrial’ model of education, which was the overwhelmingly predominant standard for public education throughout the 20th century, is still deeply ingrained in present-day educational institutions. This model employs traditional teaching styles that favour more rote teaching and learning methods that many students find difficult to adhere to. This instructional model holds little relevance for modern-day students who are now beholden, for better or worse, to a new digital paradigm.

Reaching all learners is a fine balance. Often students are blamed or labelled as having something "wrong" with them because they are not able to function within a specific classroom or school setting. A holistic educator will ask the question: What if a given problem is not with the student, but rather within the structure or environment itself? This is why practices
implemented within schools to support the neediest learners require holistic, equitable, and ethical approaches to ensure each learner gets what he or she needs to thrive.

Fragmentation within schools is at the root of many contemporary educational issues. The word ‘fragment’, from the Latin *fragmentum,* ‘a broken piece’, is in English both a noun and a verb. ‘Fragment’ as a noun refers to the shattered part of a larger whole. ‘Fragment’ as a verb is the action of breaking something apart.

J. Miller (2007) points out that, as a result of the industrial revolution, fragmentations exist throughout society (p. 3). During the industrial revolution, huge segments of the populations of Europe and North America were rapidly urbanized, and their connection to the land was effaced in the drab factories and warehouses of the big cities. This structural shift towards industrial and manufacturing ideals had widespread effects and extended into the education system. Agrarian schooling, with single-room school houses, housing students of various ages together, gave way to large factory-style institutions, with everything broken into neat, compartmentalized subjects and grades.

Today, students are still generally segregated within schools by age into different grades and classrooms. Subjects, are, for the most part, taught as discrete entities. Multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary projects are still the exception rather than the rule, most especially in junior high and senior high school environments. This move towards more fragmented structures in large modern-day educational institutions, from the more connected togetherness that occurred in the traditional North American rural one-room schoolhouse before the turn of the previous century, is in line with the larger societal push that encourages separateness, as evidenced by the large number of people who spend more time interacting with each other on so-called social
media than they do face-to-face. The rise of loneliness is a social epidemic (as highlighted in the Campaign to End Loneliness, n.d.) and so on. It appears that the current-day education system reinforces this fragmentation through continual practices of divisions, rather than connectedness (J.Miller, 2010, p. 4).

The movement towards streaming of students with disabilities is one example of this continued fragmentation, whereas the push for inclusive education, where students with disabilities are integrated rather than placed in alternative settings, is an example of the movement away from fragmentation. To foster connectedness, fragmented approaches to learning need to be rejected (J.Miller, 2006, p. 101).

Fragmentation in decision-making in public schools is systemic and built into the larger educational structures, from policy decisions made at the Ministerial level, all the way down to who orders classroom supplies and organizes class trips. Bureaucracy is inherent (and necessary in any large organization), but sometimes things or people are missed due to the magnitude and impersonal nature of the system. Students who present with difficulties in various areas of their lives often feel least connected to the school system, and are often marginalized by it. These fragmentations seen within schools – whether they be curricular or administrative – could be one of the reasons why students may experience difficulties.

If school practices are fragmented in that they do not service the child as a whole individual, then these practices perpetuate problems. Presuming that more holistic, whole child, and inclusive practices would help eliminate fragmentations, then it is contingent on us as educators to explore these practices in more depth.

For example, in the book *Making Learning Whole*, David Perkins (2009) identifies that a
chief problem in much of school learning: “…[is] our tendency to teach a subject in terms of its elements, pieces, topics, and so on rather than engaging students in authentic activities such that we let them ‘play the whole game’ of history, math, science or whatever subject we might be teaching” (Ritchhart, 2015, p. 74). When we fragment the curriculum, it is difficult for students to see the whole within which these fragments fit.

Fragmentation exists in other forms as well. According to Jordan, Glenn, and McGhie-Richmond (2010), teachers feel conflicting or fragmented messages about what they should be doing. For example,

Teachers may be faced with apparently disparate messages about inclusive education. On the one hand they are told that they are to meet teaching quality objectives by raising class averages in student achievement, while on the other hand told that they are to be responsible for diversifying instruction to meet a range of learner needs. It is no surprise therefore that teachers express ambivalence about including students with disabilities in their classes (p. 260).

If teachers are unclear about their focus and priorities, this can be problematic in terms of the overall program that students receive.

Concerns with Support Mechanisms

The IST process can appear like a triage structure. In a hospital, triage is the structure where treatment is provided to patients based on the severity of their condition. Typically in the school system, the students who are experiencing the most difficulty or have the most severe conditions to be addressed receive intervention first. Given the limited resources and time, those that are triaged into a less severe category may not get the support and resources they require as quickly as their needs would normally dictate. This can be deeply problematic.
Jordan (2011) notes that the triage dilemma in secondary school often arises from an informal and quasi-invisible agenda; for instance, teachers may decide to spend more time teaching particular students based on their perception of who is likely to move on to postsecondary education and succeed (p. 11). More explicit, official streaming in schools is a well-established practice that has been around since the advent of public schooling (Clandfield, 2014; Smaller, 2014; Parekh, Killoran, & Crawford, 2011; Parekh, 2013; Stoughton, 2006; Van Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2012). One of its modern variants is so-called “course selection”: students choose courses labeled as open, applied, academic, or locally-developed.

Streaming within elementary school happens as well. Smaller (2014) explains,

Explicit streaming in elementary education is carried out through the placement of many kids labelled as intellectually or socially damaged and placed in Special Education Programs for such exceptionalities as behaviour or intellectual and communication disabilities. Explicit streaming is also carried out by the placement of students deemed to be "at the top" in special programs for the gifted (p. 80).

In Smaller’s example, elementary students received specialized identification and placements based on their abilities. The students who were above average in intelligence were placed in programs for the gifted. Students below average in intelligence or in social-emotional behaviour are placed elsewhere.

Baines (2014) discusses how decisions are made about special education placement.

“Regardless of disability status, schools have long played a central role in sorting children according to abilities that matter most to socially accepted notions of ‘success’” (p. 25). She goes on to write,

Such decisions can be driven by stereotypes, bias, and powerful predispositions to blame particular populations of children, however unconscious these judgments might be. Often based in unofficial beliefs
about race-linked factors, gender and ethnicity biases, and assumptions about socioeconomic status, negative mindsets can significantly impact how students are identified, placed, and served, especially for African American children (p. 25).

There needs to be a pervasive effort to ensure that practices put in place are ethical, equitable, and mindful. It is irresponsible to allow for structures to perpetuate outdated practices, stereotypes, and biases when we are in an age where we have been called to think critically about all that we do.

The concept of subjectivity in this stratification of students cannot be disregarded. “The role of subjectivity in the labeling process is a ‘chicken and egg’ problem, with questions of whether a student’s behavior drives people’s perceptions of ability or whether assumptions about normalcy instead impact a student’s experience and subsequent actions” (Baines, 2014, p. 26). In other words, it is valuable to consciously look at how our common assumptions and thinking patterns about ability and normalcy impact the decisions made and not made for students.

Baines (2014) says there is a tendency to assume that a label tells the whole story about a student (p. 69). We cannot reduce people to just a label because who every individual is more complicated and intricate than words can often describe. Our students are individuals with their own life stories and a whole future ahead of them. Never do we want them to feel limited because the choices educators make on their behalf have stifled their pathways to self-actualization.

How can support be expanded so as not to limit students? Baines (2014) writes, “…supporting ability development in classrooms requires improved information-gathering systems, supports informed by knowledge of student strengths, and a focus on bridging any gaps between teacher concerns and student goals” (p. 112). These are a few examples provided from the
literature. However, Baines’ advice of what schools need is worth deconstructing. An improvement in information-gathering systems such as assessments, observations, and conversations all have a place in moving students forward. Looking at students’ strengths, rather than their deficits, is one way to frame students in a positive light. If educators focus on what students can do, rather than what they cannot do, this could have profound effects on how students come to see themselves.

The IST does work at bridging the gap between teacher concerns and student goals. But the reality of working in a school cannot be overlooked. Gaps do exist for our students, and they can get bigger and bigger, by the mere fact that no one knows how to bridge the gaps. Perhaps, there is not enough time and resources to bridge the gap. What then, is the answer, to offering holistic mechanisms of support to our neediest students?

‘IST’ is an Ontario Ministry of Education term. However, support structures like the IST exist in other places as well. For example, in South Africa two types of support teams exist: District-Based Support Teams (DBST) and Institutional-Level Support Teams (ILST). The prior team is facilitated at the district level and the latter is a team facilitated at the school level. The ILST appears to be similar to the IST found within this study.

Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht, and Nel (2016) found that,

Within the macro-system, the teachers reflect that the DBST, as a support system, does have its advantages, since they assist teachers by providing them with advice about how to identify learners with barriers to learning, they do organise meetings with teachers, monitor the ILSTs and assist with learner referrals to other institutions. Despite these efforts, teachers are in need of practical solutions/strategies to support learners who experience barriers to learning and they find the referral procedure tedious. The ILSTs are also functional to a degree. They conduct meetings to discuss learners who experience barriers to learning; however, teachers are reluctant to refer learners discussed in ILST meetings to the DBST for intervention (p. 11).
In this example, these teams enabled support for learners who were experiencing barriers to their learning.

In the United States, such legislation as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Response to Intervention (RtI) has encouraged the use of team approaches to support students (Crone, Carlson, Haack, Kennedy, Baker, & Fien, 2016, p. 80). According to Bahr and Kovaleski’s work (2006) in Crone et al’s study (2016), “Problem-solving teams have long served multiple purposes, including diagnostic assessment, teacher support, and identification of behavioral and academic challenges” (p. 80).

In a movement towards Data-Based Decision Making (DBDM) in the Pacific Northwest of the United State, this context found that,

A model for implementation of DBDM practices should be specific, including recommended time frames for student discussions, timelines for frequency of meetings and following up on action items, and a self-assessment tool that data teams could use to determine whether they had met key objectives during each meeting. A well-defined DBDM model would also address capacity building, both within the school and the school district (Crone et al, 2016, p. 91).

Crone et al’s study looked at how teams were supporting educational improvement in middle schools.

Similar to the IST, there are several factors to consider when implementing a team approach to students who experience barriers to their learning. Such considerations of allotment of time, meetings about students, tracking of actions, assessment, and capacity-building are all considerations when providing support for students. Ontario’s ISTs, South Africa’s DBSTs and
ILSTs, and the Pacific Northwest’s DBDM movement all work towards fostering student achievement through mechanisms that enable growth.

The IST, like any other educational structure, can be managed in ways that engender either positive or negative outcomes: they can either perpetuate fragmentations within schools or bring people together to move away from division and obstructionism. When operating effectively, ISTs can inspire collaboration, and foster an environment in which teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders can work as a team to provide the most and best support for students experiencing difficulties.

ISTs are not effective when decisions are governed by misconceptions about students, based on prior knowledge, experiences, and mindsets, and not appreciating the psychological and affective complexities that are part and parcel of who the students are. It is not uncommon to have decisions made based on the functionalist belief within education that students are to be viewed as “…objects to be graded, labeled, or placed differentially in the social hierarchy” (Lin, 2007, p. 363).

Baines (2014) shared a study from Hapner and Imel (2002), which found that “…students felt less disenfranchised with schooling when they could voice their concerns and play a role in their IEP process, placement, and other educational decisions” (p. 31). Students need to feel like their voices are included in the decision-making process around their education, since it is their lives, present and future, that are being impacted. They need to be agents in their own evolution, both as students and human beings. Students who are active participants in their education will come to care and appreciate learning more so than those who are not.

By giving students a voice, teaching them to communicate and express their needs,
giving them the skills to ask for help, and guiding them to learn to be intuitive about what their strengths and interests are, will essentially help students to become empowered. Empowered students are confident and liberated, prepared to tackle life, and unafraid to take healthy risks in their future lives.

**Special Education in the Ontario Public Education System**

This research is situated within public elementary schools in Ontario. Much of this work, at the school level, falls under the umbrella of special education. That said, I am intentionally using the term ‘students experiencing difficulties’ because this work looks at all students needing assistance, not just those with formal identifications and exceptionalities.

There are four phases in the IST process as outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2001). The *first stage* is classroom screening and interventions. The classroom teacher notices that a student is experiencing difficulties, and subsequently attempts to implement classroom-based strategies to help this student. Often a growth plan is created at this stage, in conjunction with parents, to explicitly lay out the areas of need this student is working on. The student’s progress is tracked and additional data are gathered during this period. Once the teacher has exhausted his or her classroom-based interventions, the teacher makes a referral to the IST to assist with problem-solving ways to support this student (OMOE, 2001).

The *second stage* is the referral to the IST. The team sets up a meeting and informs the parents of a given student about this discussion (OMOE, 2001). During the meeting, the team has a detailed discussion about this student’s current situation, and develops an action plan with recommendations that are to be implemented. At this point, recommendations for supplemental academic or psycho-educational testing may be suggested.
Additional assessments are used to gather additional information about a student’s learning profile. From these types of tests, assessors are able to see where strengths and needs exist for the particular student. There is a lot to consider when it comes to assessing students in this regime. Academic and psycho-educational assessments are both forms of standardized tests. They provide a snapshot of how the student performs at a particular moment in time. Like any standardized test, the results always need to be used in conjunction with other forms of data regarding a given student.

The third stage of the referral process consists of follow-up meetings of the IST, where progress is shared and additional interventions may be suggested. The nature of these subsequent meetings are framed by how the student responds to the recommendations made by the team during the initial IST meeting.

The fourth stage is referral to an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). If a student is going to be identified with a special education identification, then an IPRC is organized and, based on the ISTs recommendations and gathered assessments, the student receives an identification and placement (OMOE, 2001). Following this stage, an IEP is drafted for the student outlining specific accommodations and modifications this student requires for his or her learning.

The speed at which this process moves can vary based on many factors. For example, a student waiting to receive an academic assessment may have to wait several months before he or she is seen to be tested. Reluctance from parents is sometimes what stalls the process from moving forward. Access to school psychologists or scheduling meetings for all involved might take time.
It is the IPRC that determines the identification and placement that a student will receive. These decisions are made by a committee who look at supporting documents, like a psycho-educational assessments, to determine student labeling and programming moving forward. This committee often includes many of the same members that are on the IST. Parents, families, and/or students of legal age have to sign all paperwork before an identification and placement can take effect.

Students who are identified with an exceptionality through the IPRC receive an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to outline their identification, placement, and learning needs and expectations moving forward. This document is a living document, and is updated as necessary, at least three times a year. Students who do not have a formal identification can still have an IEP to support them. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has two subgroups for these students who do not have an exceptionality, but are receiving special education support in the form of an IEP.

Group 1 is called ‘Non-identified’ and Group 2 is called ‘Local IEP’. The former is for students who are non-identified but receiving special education programming based on an IEP. The latter is for students who do not receive formal special education programming, but rather direct assistance within their classroom (Brown & Parekh, 2010, p. 7). The rationale for receiving support with or without the label is at best murky, and at its worst inconsistent.

Throughout the various stages of support, the IST plays a central role in moving student through this referral process. Correa, Jones, Thomas, and Morsink (2005) summarize two main reasons for creating and maintaining effective school-based teams:

1. There is an increase in the number of school-age students who have
exceptionalities or are at risk of failure.

2. The difficulties these students face are complex and cannot be solved in isolation. Both of these reasons outline the need for the IST to be effective. They sit at the center of students getting support or not getting support. Their influence on what these supports look like are crucial to what will happen to these students.

Bahr, Whitten, Dieker, Kocarek, and Manson (1999) point out, “School-based intervention teams represent an approach to service delivery that has the potential to assist schools in addressing diverse student needs” (p. 67). Students who are struggling, require more than one mind and more than one pair of hands to support them to overcome their difficulties. Correa and colleagues (2005) highlight the importance of “teaming” that takes place at ISTs and similar structures; they define this as the “professional and parental sharing of information and expertise, in which two or more persons work together to meet a common goal” (p. 5).

Service delivery models provide a description of how schools and school boards organize their services for students. Jordan (2007) speaks of the ‘Cascade Model’ where services and placements range from specialized settings to regular class settings (p. 45). When decisions are made by school-based teams to determine placement of students, the “least restrictive environment” should be the ultimate goal (Correa et al., 2005, p. 9).

This Cascade Model parallels the tiered approach to assessment and intervention provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education in their Learning for All (2011) document:

- **Tier one** is when principles of UD and DI are applied to the assessment and instruction of all students.
- **Tier two** is when additional differentiated instructional strategies and interventions
are provided to students requiring additional support.

- **Tier three** is when specific students are determined to require more intensive support (p. 22).

Tiers one and two fall on the classroom teacher to implement. Tier three is when additional support is accessed, likely through the use of the IST.

Similarly, Hess, Magnuson, and Beeler (2012) describe levels of intervention as ‘universal’, ‘selected,’ and ‘indicated’:

- **Universal** applies: “at a primary prevention level, no students are identified as having special needs or problems; instead a positive foundation is created that supports the greatest number of children” (Hess et al., 2012, p. 366).
- **Selected** applies when specific students or groups of students are showing signs that specific interventions are required (Hess et al., 2012, p. 367).
- **Indicated** applies when students have not responded to interventions, so additional time, effort and resources are required (Hess et al., 2012, p. 368).

Levels of intervention are outlined from the least to the most intensive. These levels serve as a net to support students at various levels of needs.

In the United States, their Response to Intervention (RtI) legislation encourages a multi-level support and response structure. O’Connor, Bocian, Sanchez, and Beach (2014) write,

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) encourages schools to adopt and implement multilevel prevention systems, known as response-to-intervention (RtI) models. The motivation for RtI stems in part from dissatisfaction with the traditional method for identifying students with learning disabilities (LD) in reading, which involves a discrepancy between a student’s cognitive ability and achievement (p. 307).
When a tiered approach to accessing various supports is utilized, it is more likely that students receive help at various stages of need, rather than being labeled and then getting support.

**Political Context and History of the Problem**

As an elementary teacher, I work within the public elementary school system. It is therefore important to contextualize the political environment in which public education, and this research, exist. This study is concerned with how the IST structure works within Ontario public elementary schools. In Ontario, school boards are under no legislative responsibility to implement IST meetings within their schools (OMOE, 2001).

In Ontario, the provincial government oversees the education system. In recent years, this government has been controlled at different points by either the Liberals or the Progressive Conservatives. Currently, the ruling Liberal government at the provincial level is under the leadership of Premier Kathleen Wynne.

Both the Liberals and the progressive Conservatives have pursued a globalist, neoliberal approach to governance, both domestically and internationally. Examples of this stem from the federal level with: Prime Minister Trudeau’s support for oil pipelines like the Keystone XL, as well as his trumpeting of the now-defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership. As for Wynne’s provincial government, Ontario has witnessed an increase in precarious employment, offering less job stability for those in these types of positions. Moreover, the standardized testing of all students in grades three, six, and nine which was instituted by Premier Mike Harris’ Progressive Conservative government in 1996 in Ontario, continues to be in place.

As in most jurisdictions in the developed world, the dominant neoliberal worldview, driven by an intense ‘survival of the fittest’ mindset, filters down from the higher levels of
government, in the form of Ministerial policy, to the local school boards, and ultimately to the individual schools. The outcomes of this trickle-down politics ultimately affect educators and students. Everyone in our society is affected in some way by neoliberal politics, and our students are definitely no exception.

By its very nature, neoliberalism contains a narrow understanding of the purpose of education. Joshee (2012) writes, “In the educational policy arena this [neoliberalism] has spawned discourses of choice and accountability; school success has been equated with achievement on standardized tests” (p. 71). The push for standardized testing encourages this market-based thinking, in which test scores determine student merit.

Standardized testing, as one example, assumes that all students can perform in test-like situations. It disregards, or perhaps chooses to ignore, those students who underperform in these types of assessment. For students to perform well on such tests, they are required to conform to a top-down method of assessment. Foucault theorized that “governmentality” is a “means to produce conforming or ‘docile’ citizens, most of all through the education system” (During, 1999, p. 4). As responsible educators, we must ask ourselves: Is this the type of students the education system aims to produce?

Chomsky makes the claim that,

Far from the democratic education we claim to have, what we really have in place is a sophisticated colonial model of education designed primarily to train teachers in ways in which the intellectual dimension of teaching is often devalued. The major objective of a colonial education is to further de-skill teachers and students to walk unreflectively through a labyrinth of procedures and techniques (Chomsky, 2000, p. 3).
He further states, “A good teacher knows that the best way to help students learn is to allow them to find the truth by themselves” (p. 21). He goes on to say, “True learning comes about through the discovery of truth, not through the imposition of an official truth” (Chomsky, 2000, p. 21). In other words, Chomsky believes in students exploring and discovering their own knowledge, rather than having information imposed on them. This approach helps students to become freer thinkers rather than docile citizens.

Vietnamese Zen monk and philosopher Thich Nhat Hahn views teachers as healers (Hooks, 1994, p. 14). When working with the most vulnerable students within our system, this part of a teacher’s skill-set must come to the fore. Michael Ventura (2000) states this notion eloquently:

> A good education is a form of preventive medicine. It is a strengthener of one's mental, emotional and spiritual immune system. Healing, then, in this systemic sense, is part of a teacher's job--a fact that the vocabulary of education retains from its ancient roots: one earns a doctorate in literature and history and political science and economics and philosophy, etc., as well as in medicine. One becomes a doctor of knowledge. In that usage is the nuance that knowledge is a branch and form of medicine, a curative, a way of healing (p.2).

Similarly to Thich Nhat Hahn, Ventura brings to light that knowledge is a way of healing. Students cannot be viewed solely as vessels to be filled with information, but rather as organic and spiritual entities, who often need both nurturing and healing. A one-dimensional teachers, who are oblivious to the emotional and psychological needs of the students in their care will fail miserably in the positions.

For example, in Creating a Continuum of Care, Hess, Magnuson, & Beeler (2012) state:

> The challenge to education is to find a model of service that incorporates
strategies for supporting healthy social-emotional development for all children, providing targeted, evidence-based services for children who need higher levels of support, and incorporating and aligning these services to be congruent with the context of schools and the goal of increased academic achievement (p. 365).

The healthy development of each learner should be at the heart of an educator’s work. A student’s social and emotional development cannot be ignored, if we hope to maximize that student’s academic success. Learners may live fragmented lives, but they are ultimately whole beings: they can be thought of as complex systems in which the various elements need to be balanced to ensure healthy development. In this sense, seeing education as preventative medicine and teachers as healers is ever so important in reaching all students and supporting them in making successful gains.

However, the education system has some work to do to support the whole child. Brown & Parekh (2010) explain that current models of special education within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) were designed and implemented during the 1970s and 1980s. Such models are outdated, and lack relevancy to Ontario’s changing education system (p. 61). In 1985, Bill 82 was passed by the Ministry of Education, stating that in Ontario all school boards are required to provide “appropriate Special Education services for its pupils identified as “exceptional”’ (Brown and Parekh, 2010, p. 5). Autism was not included in this definition when the Bill was passed in the 1980s, but has been added in recent years (Brown & Parekh, 2010, p. 6).

The TDSB tracked a cohort of students in Toronto and North York from entry into school to grade 9. In Senior Kindergarten, all these students had the Early Development Indicators (EDI) administered to them. The EDI is a questionnaire that kindergarten teachers complete to measure their students’ abilities to meet “age appropriate developmental expectations” (Early
One finding from this study showed was that 23% of these students had been identified with an exceptionality or been put on an IEP by grade 9. This excluded gifted identifications (Brown and Parekh, 2010, p. 46). At the time of this report (2010), 15% of actual students had non-gifted special needs throughout the entire TDSB (Brown & Parekh, 2010, p. 46). The ‘non-gifted’ designation refers to all exceptionalities except giftedness, like Autism, Learning Disability, Language Impairment, Mild Intellectual Disability, Developmental Disability, Physical Disability, Behavioural, Blind and Low Vision, and Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Another finding showed that many of those students in the cohort who were flagged as ‘high risk’ in kindergarten were those who received a non-gifted identification by high school (p. 47). This supports the need for early identification. The TDSB reports that identification of students through the IPRC and IEP process is less likely to occur after the middle years in elementary school (Brown & Parekh, 2010, p. 47).

As I stated earlier, for this work, I did not want to look at only students with exceptionalities or disabilities. I wanted to look at all students. The term ‘students experiencing difficulties’ is an emerging idea and by my definition encompasses students with or without exceptionalities, and with or without identifications. I intend that this term be taken in the broadest of ways: it could apply to any student at any given time. There does not need to be a meeting or formal paperwork trail or, for that matter, a diagnosis for me to say “I’m struggling” at any given time. So the question arises: Why do students always need such a rigorous bureaucratic process, when trying to get the assistance they need?

This question is an important one to keep in mind. I support the use of ISTs since I know...
it to be the gateway to support for students because I have witnessed how students do not receive help when the IST is not accessed within a school. However, I also know that it should not have to be so complicated to get help. Drowning in paperwork or convoluted processes as a teacher does not necessarily lead to better teaching or support for students. So much has to be considered in this topic. As mentioned earlier, there are so many layers to this study that I did not expect.

**Theoretical Framework: Figured Worlds**

This research focuses on students who may, at one time or another, assume the character role of “student who experiences difficulties in school.” Given that this work talks about the whole child, it cannot disregard the idea of identity politics. Identity politics are the social construction of identities.

For example, having an academic identity is one identity someone could assume. Baines (2014) defines academic identities: “…as personal perceptions of academic ability resulting from an ongoing process of self-understanding in relation to others, the demands of educational contexts, cultural definitions of academic success, and personal interests” (p. 68). This definition reinforces the notion that academic identities exist, and are mediated by a myriad of societal and personal factors.

Within identity politics, the naming of a student as having a learning disability, for example, gives it a form. The language around such label can construct and shape the student’s academic identity. This is problematic, given that this identity is constructed for the student, with little or no input from the student.

This research works within the theoretical framework of Holland’s ‘figured worlds’. This theory, influenced by the work of Bakhtin and Vygotsky, looks at how identity, agency, culture,
and society all come together to provide a lens on how to create and analyze identity, and, for that matter, the world at large. Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain (1998) define figured worlds as: “…a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52).

Understanding and giving credence to this theory of figured worlds is based upon the presumption that humans are affected by their cultural and social surroundings. As Luis Urrieta Jr. (2007), in his overview of Holland et al.’s work, explains that figured worlds have four dimensions:

1. Figured worlds are cultural phenomenon to which people are recruited, or into which people enter, and that develop through the work of their participants.

2. Figured worlds function as contexts of meaning within which social encounters have significance and people’s positions matter. Activities relevant to these worlds take meaning from them and are situated in particular times and places.

3. Figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced, which means that in them people are sorted and learn to relate to each other in different ways.

4. Figured worlds distribute people by relating them to landscapes of action; thus activities related to the worlds are populated by familiar social types and host to individual senses of self (p. 108).

For example, Indigo Esmonde’s (2014) research looks at figured worlds in relation to mathematics education and equity. To describe figured worlds, she writes, “A classroom can be an example of a figured world, with storylines such as the following: Teachers guide student learning, give students marks, and graduate them on to the next class” (p. 350). In this example, a prescribed storyline occurs, but the characters always theoretically have the power to reject or
accept it at will.

According to Esmonde (2014), “Although individuals may develop their own personal understandings of figured worlds, figured worlds are primarily collective constructions that are developed through participation with others” (p. 352). Within the IST context, I think that both the individual and the collective construct their own storylines within their figured world. For instance, if a student is present during an IST meeting (ISTM) where his or her needs are discussed, he or she may come to construct his or her own individual storyline about him or herself based on what others are saying about that particular student. The collective construction is the storyline the other people in the meeting make about the student.

In the role of SERT, I sat in several ISTMs. A few years ago, I worked with a student named Bane who was experiencing difficulties in many areas of his life. Bane was a student with a mild intellectual disability (MID). This means that according to his psychoeducational testing he is below average in intelligence. At this time, he was in foster care because his family was not able to take care of him.

During one meeting about Bane, various professionals were invited in to talk about his situation. Bane was included in this meeting as he was in grade seven at the time, and old enough to be a part of discussions about him. In this meeting, concerns about Bane’s academic, behavioural, social, and emotional needs were shared. Bane spent most of this meeting upset. When asked why he was crying, he shared that he felt like everyone was against him. In this situation, his individual storyline about the meeting was steeped in negativity. The collective, those adults around the table, believed that this meeting would help Bane. This temporary figured world was constructed with Bane as the main character fraught with problems.
Like Holland et al., Chomsky speaks about the role teachers play in producing students in a certain image. Chomsky writes, “...teachers are expected to engage in a form of moral, social, political, and economic reproduction designed to shape students in the image of the dominant society” (Chomsky, 2000, p. 3). If this statement is true, then teachers can play an important role in reproducing students in the image of the dominant society—they are key players in the construction of students’ identities. It is critical, I believe, for all educators to become aware of how influential their role in student lives can actually be.

One day, I was preparing for a class when I noticed a student from another class sitting outside my classroom. He was banging his legs against the desk. Often this student is asked to leave his classroom because of his disruptive behaviour. Since I was on prep time, and his teacher was away, and he had a supply teacher, I decided to take him for a five-minute break. In doing this, I let him play with Lego in a quiet space. I know that he appreciated this time because he said so and thanked me for it. He reintegrated back into his classroom for the last 50 minutes of the day with ease. I think this time of reduced stress helped him. I think that this experience helped to frame how the rest of his day went. I often ask my students, “What’s the best part of your day?” They are forced to pick something. It is very rare that students say nothing when the question is phrased like this.

Interactions between people within schools always hold meaning, whether overtly or covertly. How a teacher interacts with a student can impact how the rest of the day goes for that student. The ISTM is a place of interaction where decisions are made about the students. In this setting, educational professionals become the authors of the identity of ‘students experiencing difficulties.’ ISTMs then become a space of negotiation of identity, where a particular student, whether present or not, is discussed. Needless to say, this affects how these people interact with
this student going forward.

Hatt (2012) postulates that, “All those involved in the institution of schooling help to shape who we think we are, who others think we are, and who we think we can become” (p. 439). With this, it is also relevant to keep in mind that the self-fulfilling prophecy effect is possible. It is “[w]hen your expectations about a person’s actions cause that person to behave in the expected way” (Nairne, Smith, & Lindsay, 2001, p. 526–7). Expectations invariably have an impact upon student performance.

Hatt (2012) writes, “Schools’ labeling of mental capacities is embedded in issues of power. Smartness is largely a culturally produced phenomenon (as are learning disabilities) but made ‘‘real’’ through discourse and tangible artifacts such as grades, standardized test scores, entry to gifted programs, and academic credentials” (p. 455). Hatt discusses how labels are culturally produced. Often these labels, or rather identifications as they are sometimes called, are constructed within ISTMs. This act of labeling students holds power.

Baines (2014) discusses some of the social processes of disablement. She writes:

In an age when academic learning has become the socially accepted definition and gateway to success, being labeled as learning deficient can threaten the possibility that their imagined identities can ever become reality. They are designated to watch from the sidelines, destined to cater to the needs of others. While they are officially included in the group, they are, in effect, socially excluded (p. 22).

Although she provides a rather bleak perspective, Baines does highlight that labelling students can have long-term effects on them and where they end up in their future. Society’s dominant ideology is that academic smarts is the gateway to success. However, clearly not all students will be academically successful: What then is their future? It is profoundly irresponsible to cast off those students who are not able to conform to traditional academic learning as the
detritus of modern human social life.

Educators have an impact on how students are supported. “In school settings, adults wield incredible power over the academic identity development of their students through the ways in which they engage with and relate to students, and how they encourage (or discourage) students’ relationship to academic learning” (Baines, 2014, p. 69). It is very apparent that educators can have both positive and negative impacts on students’ lives. To explore these ideas further, this thesis delves into its own research design, which is described in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

- E.E. Cummings.

In this qualitative study, I interviewed five elementary school principals working in southern Ontario, Canada. The main goal was to explore the impact of the IST on students experiencing difficulties within schools. The participants interviewed for this study all worked for the same public elementary school board in southern Ontario. In 2017, this school board consisted of approximately 180 elementary schools and approximately 36 secondary schools. These numbers continue to grow, yearly, with new schools opening. By these numbers, this school board is considered to be a very large board, educating students from kindergarten to grade twelve.

In this chapter, I situate this research within the qualitative research traditions of modified grounded theory and case study to explore the research questions stated earlier. To recap, they are:

1. What are the experiences of five public elementary principals who implement a holistic IST structure at their schools to support students who are experiencing difficulties?
2. How did five principals get their staff to assume a holistic and shared responsibility for students experiencing difficulties?
3. How did these principals use a holistic IST structure to shift staff thinking about students experiencing difficulties?
These questions have been slightly reworded over the course of writing this dissertation. The reason for certain modifications is that the data collected provided findings that provoked emerging questions to be shared and answered.

My intention in this work was to listen to the voices of administrators as they described their practices and experiences implementing structures within their schools to support students to improve both their learning outcomes and their overall in-school experiences. My intentions stem from my desire to do right by students and educators alike who are navigating the structures that pervade the public education system in Ontario.

The research design I employed for this study was a hybrid synthesis of modified grounded theory and case study. In the early stages of my research design, I explored the use of portraiture methodology. However, as my research progressed, I discovered that this work is better situated within a case study research model.

The design I have chosen represents the most appropriate approach for this work because it has allowed me to hear the authentic voices of the leaders within our public schools, and to learn from them. These are the people on the front lines, who are trying to make sense, on an ongoing basis, of all the government policies and structures, school-board mandates, and in-school policies in order to deliver the best possible learning outcomes for the students in their charge. They are the ones who are required to translate the educational theories and bureaucratic jargon into real-life practices. This is by no means an exact science, and the best-laid plans can sometimes go awry.

Modified grounded theory and case study allowed a point of entry to gather the voices of the participants in my research, and to represent them in a way that allows for sharing of their
voices, but that also provided me a vehicle for questioning the work that they do. This questioning gives the means for us to think critically about the work that we all do as educators.

I chose my design of modified grounded theory and case study because it worked with my research intentions. I was able to hear directly from individuals working within the public education system who have to respond to the various, and sometimes conflicting needs of the teachers, students, and school-board administrative officials. They are the ones who have to integrate theory and practice, to synthesize a school plan that works for everyone involved.

Principals assume a unique role within schools. They are the leaders of staff and students, and often pinnacle people to the community at large. However, they also have responsibilities to the school board and the Ministry of Education. In this middle-management position, they constantly have to navigate what they know about educational theory with quotidian practice. Gathering the voices of principals in this study provided deep insights into the inner workings of the IST structure.

Research Approaches

Modified Critical Grounded Theory

This study is a qualitative research project that used a modified version of grounded theory. Punch (2009) writes, “Grounded theory is a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data” (p. 130). Creswell (1998) writes, “… grounded theorists undertake research to develop theory” (p. 38). Similarly, Lichtman (2011), advises that grounded theory uses induction to generate a theory from data (p. 48).

Charmaz (2013), points out, “The logic of grounded theory involves fragmenting empirical data through coding and working with resultant codes to construct abstract categories
that fit these data and offer a conceptual analysis of them” (p. 295). The interview data is coded or broken apart into more usable fragments that are then clustered and perhaps transformed into categories. These categories bring the fragments back together in some sort of new emerging semblance of order. From there, this new semblance gives way for concepts and theories to emerge. How concepts are defined plays a pivotal role in how they are constructed and deconstructed and how data evolves into deeper meaning through this conceptual analysis.

Modified grounded theory served to help me generate my questions for investigation, and provided me a structure for data collection and data analysis. This work uses three main data sources:

1. Semi-structured interviews
2. Researcher’s journal
3. Document analysis

Charmaz (2013) discusses three main areas of grounded theory: coding, theoretical sampling, and theory construction (p. 299). I undertook this study with these three areas defining my research framework. The interview transcripts from the five participants were coded broadly at first to generate many emerging themes. The data was then coded a second and third time, helping to narrow and sort the themes into more concise findings. These themes continued to evolve through the course of my review of the literature.

The ideas that emerged from this research data are meant to initiate further conversations about this topic. Interpretation of them is where critical extensions of this work can occur and push thinking within this topic to deeper levels of meaning.

My research design for this study adhered to the appropriate ethical procedures set out by
my university to conduct my research with human participants. University ethics was granted to complete this study, and each participant involved signed an informed-consent form in order to participate. Pseudonyms are used for all participants and locations to preserve the confidentiality and integrity of those involved with this study.

This work is not a pure grounded theory project, but rather modifies traditional grounded theory methods to create a hybrid approach. Charmaz (2013) says, “Researchers frequently combine grounded theory strategies, especially coding, with narrative and thematic analyses” (p. 299). The synthesis of methodologies helped to investigate the many layers of this research, but also to present my findings. This work uses case study methods to narrate the data in Chapter 4.

**CASE STUDY**

These case studies are a representation of the data collected for this study. Miles (2015) writes, “Case study methodology provides an account of practice through which to explore, contextualize and theorize practice” (p. 312). The case studies in this dissertation share the practices of five principals, and in the process contextualize and theorize their practices.

Five case studies are shared but are to be seen as case-by-case data sets. In other words, each one highlights the single voice of each participant, as they recount their experiences with the IST structures in their particular school setting. This was not a longitudinal study. It represents a finite time period that reflects the thinking of these participants in 2015. This was a time when job action at the elementary school level was at a height of tension. Contract negotiations were in a standstill, as teachers were working-to-rule.

Miles (2015) argues, “ … case study needs to provide an account of something, explained analytically, which is temporally and spatially situated within its representation” (p. 315). This
means that these studies provide an account and representation of the thinking of these participants during the summer of 2015. It is possible that their perspectives today (2017) are different than they were before. We are dynamic beings living in a dynamic environment, and opinions and feelings can evolve over time.

However, even though each case stands as its own representation, it is also meant to inform other cases. Amerson (2011) writes, “Using replication logic, each case study should be viewed as a single experiment. When the researcher identifies an important finding within a single case, the next step is to replicate this with more experiments. Each subsequent case study either predicts comparable results or predicts different results, but for expected reasons” (p. 427).

For this research study, case study worked well as the chosen methodology because it focused on the key part of the IST whole, that being the voice of the principals. Gerring (2007) writes, “Sometimes, in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples. We gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part” (p. 1). It was focusing on these individual cases that lead to more in-depth knowledge of the inner workings of the IST structure. “The fewer cases there are, and the more intensively they are studied, the more a work merits the appellation ‘case study’” (Gerring, 2007, p. 20).

One real reason why case studies worked for this study is because case studies are effective ways for other practitioners to learn about practices happening within schools. Case studies open up dialogue about topics, and perhaps spark controversy and debate. However, all can lead to expanding our understanding and thinking about this important topic.

Sudzina writes, “Research indicates that teaching with cases can offer teacher educators a
variety of opportunities to expand and extend their teaching skills, problem solving abilities, and grasp of contemporary issues in classrooms today” (Sudzina, 1999, p. vii). If this study could achieve those things within a teacher educator's program, or perhaps be used in Principal Qualification Program (PQP) courses, or in the Special Education Additional Qualification (AQ) courses, then practitioners could learn from this work.

RESEARCH METHODS

RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

I chose elementary schools within the Ontario public system as the research setting for this study, given my experience as an elementary school teacher within an Ontario public school. ISTs are also held at the secondary level, making this support mechanism available to students from kindergarten to grade twelve. However, for the purpose of this study, the sample size of this research was limited to five elementary principals working within the public school system in Ontario.

Four of the five principals were female, and one was male. Each principal is qualified with their PQP Parts 1 and 2, and are members of the Ontario Principal’s Council. They all possess some qualifications and/or background in special education. Each participant has been a teacher, vice-principal, and now principal within various public school boards in Ontario. I did not ask for or specify ethnic, cultural, or religious affiliations of the participants, and thus do not wish to name them as belonging to any particular group.

I had initially wished to interview teachers, but the school board’s decision not to provide ethical approval for me to do so obliged me to redesign my research around interviewing school principals. I also made the conscious choice to work specifically with principals, and these
specific ones, because I believe that the administrators within schools hold significant power.

Principals are at the helm of their school, and influence the direction the school takes. They collaborate with a number of different parties, including students, teachers, families, the larger community, and the school board. Although I had initially wanted to include the voices of teachers, and even parents and students in this work, I eventually decided that limiting my research to interviews of the principals actually provided a sharper focus to my data collection and analysis.

When I recruited my participants, I sent out a ‘Letter to Participate’ (see Appendix A) to principals within my own academic and professional networks. Subsequently, these principals shared this letter with colleagues, and thus I found five principals eager to be a part of my work. I went with all five participants who responded by email to my letter and I quickly noticed that they all viewed the IST structure as a positive mechanism for student support.

Participants in my study met with me to be interviewed. Each interview consisted of approximately 15 questions (see Appendix C). The interviews lasted anywhere from 60 to 90 minutes in length. I corresponded via email with the participants prior to and following each interview. All interviews took place during July and August 2015. I decided to restrict the sample size of this study to five people, as a small sample size gave me the opportunity to do more in-depth analysis of each of the case studies.

Blankstein (2011) explains Sternin’s implementation of positive deviance (PD) in relation to childhood malnutrition in Vietnam. He writes, “Find those families whose children were thriving while those around them were going hungry, study how they achieved their successes, and then spread those practices throughout the community” (p. 2). This scale of PD can be
applied to different areas of the education system. As related to this research, if we look at PD through the perspective of the participant principals, we can study those ISTs that are achieving success and spread that learning through this research to other educators. This transference of knowledge is often at the root of positive change.

Figure 1 provides basic information about the participants. It is not meant for the purposes of comparison, but rather to concisely organize certain information about each of them to aid in understanding the case studies in Chapter 4. PQP is the acronym for ‘Principal’s Qualification Program’.

Figure 1: Information about Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>PQP 1 Qualifications</th>
<th>PQP 2 Qualifications</th>
<th>Specialized Degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kalila Ramey</td>
<td>Braveheart</td>
<td>May 2006</td>
<td>January 2007</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayley Blythe</td>
<td>Cadence</td>
<td>February 2004</td>
<td>August 2004</td>
<td>Master of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy Bellamy</td>
<td>Evergreen</td>
<td>July 2002</td>
<td>June 2003</td>
<td>Master of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Heaton</td>
<td>Valishore</td>
<td>April 1999</td>
<td>August 1999</td>
<td>Master of Human Kinetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adina Gila</td>
<td>Cresco</td>
<td>January 2002</td>
<td>June 2002</td>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note here that the principal as leader of his or her school is such an important figure in the implementation and the execution of the IST structure. The principals in this study believe wholeheartedly in the IST structure. In my recruiting phase, principals who contacted me were ones who value ISTs. Almost certainly, those who do not support ISTs would
most likely not want to engage with this specific research.

This selection of participants could be seen as problematic because all the participants have positive opinions about the implementation of ISTs, and the alternative view is not gathered. Voices of principals with a negative view about ISTs were not captured in this research. Perhaps, future research could include principals who are more reluctant and hesitant of the use of ISTs. However, for this dissertation, the data gathered provide quality insight into principals who have seen ISTs work first hand, and how they managed to mobilize them within their specific settings.

**MY ROLE AS RESEARCHER**

In Creswell’s (2013) discussion about philosophical assumptions, he highlights how researcher's’ background knowledge and experiences influence the choices they make when designing their studies. He writes, “Qualitative researchers have underscored the importance of not only understanding the beliefs and theories that inform research but also actively writing about them in our reports and studies” (p. 15). I acknowledge that my position as a researcher is a privileged one. With this position, I recognize that the work I am doing deals with human participants, who deserve to be honoured and respected for the time and effort they put into being a part of this study.

As the author of this research, I had to make decisions all the time about what to include and what to exclude in this dissertation write-up. Like all humans, I cannot entirely remove my emerging and ever-evolving point of view from how the data was received, and interpreted. As a teacher who has witnessed many students experiencing difficulties struggle to make gains, I know that this shapes who I am as a person, teacher, and researcher. As a self-proclaimed
introvert, I know being in school can be very challenging for some students.

As an introvert, I know that sometimes certain voices go unheard. Often these voices have such important things to say. For me, being able to write out my ideas in this dissertation has given me an outlet to share my ideas. Gathering the voices of these participants has allowed me to give them a voice outside of their regular day to day work. Although the voices of so many others, specifically students, are not included in this work, I hope that readers know that this work is trying to do right by those voices.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval from the University of Toronto was received in February 2015. I then applied to two school boards in the spring of 2015. One board was not reviewing applications due to the political job action occurring at that time. Another board turned my research down.

At this time, I had to regroup. I was paying tuition and was not able to move forward with the next steps of my work. So I went back to the drawing board. I removed the teacher piece from my data collection, and resubmitted the changes to my study to the university. In this submission, I abandoned researching within a school board. I applied for renewal of my ethics in both February 2016 and February 2017.

I acknowledge that a hierarchical power differential does exist between me and the principal participants, because of my role as a teacher. In settings where I am a teacher, these principals would assume a role as my superior. However, in the data collection settings that this work was held, I assumed the researcher role and they took on the research participant role.

Deep respect and thoughtfulness for my human participants was maintained throughout this work. As this work is disseminated, I will also maintain ethical behaviour in sharing this
thesis going forward.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The steps that I took to collect this data were as follows:

1. I submitted ethical approval to the University of Toronto ethics board, and waited for approval.
2. Upon approval, I submitted my ethical protocol to three different school boards, and waited for approval.
3. Some boards were not reviewing applications because of work to rule. One board turned me down completely.
4. I adjusted my research, and resubmitted ethical approval to the university.
5. Upon approval, I emailed my letter to participate to potential candidates.
6. I corresponded with potential participants, until I found five candidates.
7. I shared my letter of consent with participants and the interview guide with them, and arranged interview times.
8. I held interviews at times and locations convenient to participants.
9. I transcribed all interviews.
10. I coded all interviews with preliminary codes. Generating preliminary themes.
11. I coded transcripts again, narrowing down themes, revisiting literature, and consulting with researcher’s journal and documents to strengthen themes.
12. I settled on determined themes to write about.
13. I layered themes within my theoretical framework.

I share these steps to highlight the labour that goes into conducting research. There are a lot of steps that go into gathering data in ethical and methodical ways. However, it is through these
steps that I came to see how my data informed my research beyond my initial surface layer understanding of my thesis topic.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Participants who chose to be a part of this study were honoured for their time and participation. At the start of each interview, I provided each participant with a bottle of water, a juice box, a granola bar, and gummy candies. At the end of each interview, I provided each participant with a token gift in lieu of compensation. The gifts were the same for each participant and included a thank you card and a gift certificate to the bookstore *Indigo Chapters*. A total of five token gifts were given out. See Appendix C for a copy of the frame of interview questions used.

Semi-structured interviews offered participants open-ended questions to answer. I shared the interview question guide with each participant prior to interviewing them. During the interviews, our dialogue and conversations organically grew from the planned questions. Some of the best data came from when the participants forgot that I was recording, and just talked to me like a fellow colleague or friend. This type of interview worked well for this study because of this.

**Researcher’s Journal**

Throughout my doctoral journey, I kept personal journal entries to reflect on this entire process. These entries helped me to track the various stages of being a doctoral student, and some of the hurdles I encountered along the way. The entries became most helpful to my data collection because it was a space for me to do some self-reflection. For example, I was able to express the frustration I felt when one board turned down my ethical approval; this was an event
that I am glad I documented. This was also an event that, in hindsight, I am happy occurred because it narrowed my participant pool to just principals, which made my focus sharper.

Before and after each interview, I wrote notes about the interview. Self-check-ins were an important part of the process. Being conscious of my mindset explains how I was feeling before and after each interview. Looking back at these notes served a purpose during data analysis. When transcribing the interviews, my journal also provided a space to write any additional questions that I had about the data. Some of these questions required follow-up with the participants, and some required further follow-up with the literature.

These journal entries were personal and therapeutic. I also keep a journal as a teacher and would highly recommend this to any educator. Going back and re-reading my writing always gives me deeper insight into my practice. In Chapter 6, I share a journal entry that grapples with some of my inner thinking about the IST as a practicing teacher.

**Document Analysis**

Three specific documents were important to look at for this research:

1. The referral process chart,
2. The IST template, and
3. An ISTM memo.

There are many documents that could have been looked at in great detail, but these three were specifically helpful with regard to this research topic. The referral process was discussed in Chapter 2. The IST template that I analyzed was blank. I did not look at completed ones that had student information on it. Although, as someone who has completed a lot of IST paperwork, I know what these documents look like and how they work.
The ISTM memo was shared with me through my union affiliation from my steward, following the cessation of job action. In this memo is the recommendation that ISTM`s that are embedded within the instructional day have the potential to increase commitment to this problem-solving structure.

Finally, I looked at each school`s website that included such information as the mission and values of the school, timetables, school boundaries, and policies and procedures. This material provided additional context about each school and its associated community. I also looked at the additional qualification courses that each participant holds on the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) site. This gave further details about the courses each of these participants took throughout their various careers.

**Data Management and Analysis**

Collecting the data with participants took approximately ten to fifteen interview-hours. The interview data were recorded during the sessions. Each recording was stored, transported, and accessed on my iPad.

I deliberately transcribed each interview within a few days or weeks of conducting it. This helped me to more easily return to the data-collection experience in my mind, so I could relive the interview while transcribing. I listened to the audio of each interview and typed up the text in Microsoft Word. The transcripts were sent to the participants for accuracy checking. None of the participants made any corrections to the transcripts.

Upon completion of each transcription, I coded each transcript using preliminary codes and themes. I then generated a list of all the codes and themes from each of the five interviews. This initial list included about thirty common themes: I began to see similar themes emerge and
started to cluster them together. Through subsequent readings of the transcripts, my common-
theme list was whittled down to twelve themes and then down to eight. The ‘trimmed themes’
list had themes clustered together into bigger headings with qualifiers to describe each theme.
Some of these qualifiers were at one time their own main theme. I did not use analysis software
like NVivo, as I was able to identify codes and themes through repeated and consistent
immersion in my collected data.

Some of the emerging themes that were flushed out at this phase were:

- The role of principals as leaders within schools,
- The importance of caring adults to student well-being,
- The need for equitable structures, and
- The value of connections and relationships to student success.

Other themes like offering safe spaces for learning, and the importance of teachers having
growth mindsets and knowing their learners all emerged from the raw data. In addition, themes
of stigma, stratifications, and identity construction caused by structures all became ideas of
consideration.

Analyzing the data for codes and themes was easier when I did it by hand. I marked up
the hard copies of my transcripts with a pen and highlighter, and then typed up the necessary
information. When it came time to assign final themes, I assigned each determined theme with a
number and used the numbers to label where within the transcript each theme applied. Although
I called these “final themes,” every additional read-through of the transcripts revealed more than
the previous one.

I acknowledge that my participants provided me with an abundance of rich data that all
have significant value to the field of education. However, these extensive data could not all be used because they extended beyond the scope of my research: some of the data did not necessarily pertain directly to this study.

To analyze my researcher’s journal, I clustered my ideas based on voice. The thoughts from my journal were categorized into two main voices.

1. I expressed ideas in a reflective, emotive voice, to share my feelings, thinking, and thoughts.

2. I expressed ideas in a descriptive, narrative voice, to retell what happened or note about the setting or experience of events. I detailed things like the weather, what participants were wearing, and their overall disposition.

The former voice helped me to write about my positionality and researcher’s role throughout this experience. The latter helped me add details to the case studies shared in Chapter 4. I did find that some of these notes were not necessary to present in this dissertation, but were used rather in my analysis and synthesis of the data.

The analytical strategies that I employed are the ‘flip-flop technique’ and making use of my own life experiences. Corbin and Strauss (2015) explain the flip-flop technique as “turning a concept inside out or upside down to obtain different perspective” (p. 97). This was achieved by analyzing my data through the lens of being a teacher within the system, and through the lens of being a graduate student.

Such an analysis fed into the technique called making use of life experiences. Corbin and Strauss (2015) describe this technique in the following way: “In order to gain insight into a participant’s experience, researchers can at times draw upon personal experiences that are similar
to that described by a participant for comparison purposes” (p. 98). This strategy was often used within my researcher's journal, and especially is evident when I was coding my transcripts, in which I would write notes to myself in the margins about ideas the participants shared and my own reflections on these ideas.

I opted for the use of these strategies because they were well-suited for this particular area of research. To understand my data, I really needed to play with them and look at them in different ways. Admittedly, when I looked at the data with a teacher lens, they showed to me different findings than when I looked at these same data with the mindset of a graduate student. The farther I moved away from working within the system, the more the data started to dance in my head in a completely different way. When I entered back into the system as a teacher, the data continued to morph in different ways. Ultimately, I believe that this is a positive thing, in that it is indicative of an ongoing evolution in my own understanding.

I took the following steps in processing the data: first, I segmented the written transcript by paragraphs in a grid in preparation for coding. This chunking helped to make the text that I was working with less daunting and overwhelming to organize. Later on, I also chunked this work further by slotting specific quotes I planned to work with in my writing into another grid separated by the themes. It provided another way to look at the same material. The initial chunking provided a vehicle for having the text and then the themes emerge. The alternate way of chunking had the themes emerge and then the text slotted in. Different approaches to analyzing the same data helped me clarify my thinking about my topic.

The codes for thematic data analysis emerged from the transcripts. The participants expressed similar ideas, and thus the themes emerged from the participants’ words. Many themes
emerged from the preliminary coding session of the five transcripts. I tried to group the themes based on similarities, and then synthesize them down to more specific themes. Subsequently, I went back through the transcripts to assign firming codes, by landing on four major themes that I would work with. I was the only individual to analyze these data.

I think a key piece to my data analysis was my ongoing reflection about the work that I was doing. I would always draw back upon my position and role as a special education teacher. This became a really vital piece to the analytical strategies I employed. If the teacher in me, the one out on the front lines of teaching, is not benefitting or learning from this work, then it ultimately does not serve any purpose. I think that reaching the educators doing the work each day is at the heart of real change. And to reach them in meaningful ways, we need other thinkers and leaders to work with them. Profound learning requires collaboration.

**Trustworthiness and Awareness of Research Design**

As Falk and Blumenreich (2005) state, “Validity is a term that refers to whether a study actually describes or measures what it claims to report (internal validity) and whether the findings of the study can be generalized to other situations (external validity)” (p. 13). Internal validity came in the form of all participants having the option to check their transcripts after their interviews. As stated earlier, none of the participants came back to me with changes to the raw data.

External validity came in the form of interviewing five principals and constructing five case studies based on them. Additional validity would occur if other individuals tried to recreate this research themselves.

My analysis is informed by who I am, as an individual, an educator, and a lifelong
learner. I am the person who synthesized and interpreted these data over the course of writing this dissertation. Anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) describes how readers have to see themselves in the “observer who is serving as their guide” (p. 16). In other words, sharing about me and my practice is something I hope readers can identify with, long enough to let me be their guide.

Like all researchers, especially in the qualitative domain, I bring my own personal perspectives and biases to my work. I do not think that this is necessarily detrimental to the validity of the research; the key thing is to make these biases explicit to aid in my trustworthiness to the reader. In the simplest terms, they can be summarized accordingly:

1) I am a Japanese Canadian, whose grandparents experienced the horrors of the Japanese internment camps. As such, I am aware of how a society espousing freedom can be profoundly hypocritical, and it has made me more aware of the many layers of power structures, both visible and invisible, in society.

2) I am a female educator working at the elementary level in the public school system. I am sensitive, and care deeply about my students, and am therefore drawn to the ethos of kindness, as exemplified in the field of holistic education.

3) I am applying the figured worlds theory as a framework to my research. This approach forces one to acknowledge the roles and labels imposed on us, implicitly or explicitly, by the society and the culture in which it is embedded, that define our behavior and the nature of our interactions with each other as stakeholders in the success of students.

When I designed this study, I did not realize how much my position as a teacher would affect this research. I assumed that my role as a teacher would benefit me as a researcher, but in
many ways it made it more difficult: it complicated things because I felt an internal conflict between what I have experienced as a teacher, and what I have conceptualized as a graduate student. For instance, as a teacher, I believe that students should be helped quickly and efficiently through the IST process. As a graduate student, I started to look at the ideological implications that the IST process has on students.

Now that I am back predominantly wearing the teacher hat, rather than that of a graduate student, I feel like students need help from something. Presumably, Mona, Freddy, and Bane are all still struggling. And what is there to help them, if not the IST? Because regardless of the IST, the school system and structures will assist in creating student identities, knowingly or unknowingly, it is going to happen and it cannot be helped. Regardless, our experiences (good or bad) assist in forming who we are: our ideas, thinking patterns, indeed, our entire worldview.

This methodology has been all about amalgamating the most appropriate methods together to gather authentic data. I used the practices of modified grounded theory to find participants, to develop interview questions, to transcribe, code, and analyze data. I employed case study as the format for writing up my work. They are vignettes, if anything, to show a snapshot of the educational work of each of my five participants.

Overall, working with a modified grounded theory approach, coupled with case study methodology, supported this project by providing a framework for the research design and a narrative approach to depicting the study’s results. This hybrid methodology gave space for rich data to be collected so that critical and holistic analysis could take place.

Interviewing five participants, who all hold the same positional power as principals, and who all work in the same city, helped me to compare the practices in their schools that support
students experiencing difficulties. In Chapter 4, I share a case study of each participant, and then synthesize and analyze these results in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES

"We recognize all learners as our learners and work together to ensure the discovery of potential each and every day."
- York Region District School Board.

In this chapter, I present five case studies. These studies serve as vignettes of the participants and their voices on the topic of ISTs. The interviews that informed these findings and results provided real-life and genuine insight into the IST practices that take place on the front lines in elementary schools.

For this research, I interviewed five elementary school principals, who work for the same school board in southern Ontario, Canada. The schools in which these principals work are all located within the same city, which is demographically multi-ethnic and multicultural. During the time of the interviews, all participants were on summer break from their jobs as elementary school administrators. I was also off on summer holidays and just at the beginning of a year-long leave of absence from teaching.

Each principal provided one perspective on their school context and in-school structures at their specific sites. The data showed that, from their perspective, the IST structure is working for the purposes they set out to achieve. For each of them, the purpose of the IST is to apply a team-oriented approach to helping students.

The way to an effective IST implementation is the active involvement of the participants. Some of the best processes that exist within schools are collaborative, where multiple voices are heard and where people are empowered: everyone likes to be heard, and to know that his or her input matters. Structures that do not elicit true, human engagement are empty, hollow, and
ultimately close to useless.

When it comes to helping students who are experiencing difficulties, the greatest strength educators have is the ability to try to help within the pre-existing structures. If the IST structure is the threshold between support and nonsupport, then moving students through this process is necessary to facilitate assistance. It is important that, as educators, we are mindful of how the structures in place work, and are critical of their functions: in the process of trying to help, it is conceivable that we are actually not helping in any meaningful way. There is the real possibility that we are creating bigger gaps, establishing stigmas, perpetuating stereotypes, or constructing negative identities.

Leadership is a key component in the ethical mobilization of any structure within a school. At these research sites, the principals interviewed valued the IST structure and implemented its use within their schools. For example, each principal scheduled time in their calendars to run weekly or bi-weekly ISTs at their school. This demonstrated its priority and this was articulated to the staff. Such commitment is not necessarily the norm: at other schools, ISTs can happen infrequently.

Fullan (2011) shares that principals are change leaders. He writes, “The effective change leader actively participate as a learner in helping the organization improve” (p.5). He further goes on to postulate that change requires examination of good practices, trying out the ideas yourself, and then drawing conclusions on what you learned and expanding on them (p. 5). These steps are meant to bring about effective change. “Deliberate doing is the core learning method for effective leaders” (p. 5).

The leaders in this research made intentional choices about when ISTM would be
scheduled at their schools. Figure 2 shows the frequency of IST meetings operating at the schools. All five schools had bi-weekly meetings. Additional IST meetings were scheduled when needed. At other schools, meetings can happen less frequently. These meetings typically occurred during, before or after school, at recess, and/or lunch times. The frequency of these meetings is dependent upon the principal stating that these meetings are a priority.

Figure 2: Frequency of IST Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Bi-Weekly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>As Needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Braveheart PS</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadence PS</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evergreen PS</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valishore PS</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cresco PS</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the 2015 contract negotiations with the Elementary Teachers’ Federation, it was stipulated that IST meetings would happen during the instructional day. This change likely impacts how schools now facilitate their scheduling of ISTs. However, Kalila at Braveheart PS was already implementing IST meetings during the instructional day. She specifically timetabled for some teachers to be available to cover other teachers’ classes so that these meetings could occur. This demonstrated the value she placed on the IST structure because it was a priority within her school.

The data produced some interesting findings. For one, ISTMs were found to hold a lot of decision-making power in terms of facilitating support and resources for students, for instance when team members were working together to determine an action plan for a student.
experiencing difficulties. At these schools, the responsibility of moving a student forward was one that was shared. Even the principals were often assigned specific tasks in these meetings, and were required to report back during follow-up meetings.

Since the ISTMs hold decision-making power to help students make gains, it is important that this power is not misused. Reflective, holistic, and ethical ISTs are required to ensure that the work done is actually helping, not hindering a student’s positive progress. This is where leadership on the part of the principals is so essential. They have the final say on how things move forward, and which resources and supports are called in. That said, a good leader is not authoritarian, but someone who invites collaboration. In a well-implemented IST, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts.

The principals who participated in this study all recognize that nothing is static when dealing with students. People are fluid, dynamic beings, and are changing and developing on a daily basis. This is why follow-up team meetings are necessary as check-ins on student progress. Ongoing observations, and the tracking of how a student is making gains, are vital in determining if interventions are working.

It is worth mentioning that all the principals interviewed have backgrounds in special education. Whether they worked in special education settings as teachers, or became interested in this field later on in their careers, they all had a keen interest in this field. This is important to note because it does speak to why they may have jumped at the opportunity to work with this study when I sent out my call for participants.

Although these principals have a professional interest in special education, they also have personal interests in the field as well. Four of the five principals stated that their own children
had some sort of special education identification. This helps explain why these participants spoke with such thoughtful conviction about the importance of a holistic IST structure. They have also sat on the parent side of IST meetings, and worked with school staff to get necessary supports for their own children. I think seeing the IST structure from multiple perspectives (teacher, administrator, and parent) make them more aware of how the structure does or does not work.

Some trends noticed in the data that are worthy to mention are that each school site for this project offered various levels of service to their school community. Due to various factors like staffing allocation and student enrollment, not all schools are able to offer all these levels of service. Figure 3 shows the levels of service offered at each school. All the schools were able to offer a Student Support Centre (SSC) for students identified with exceptionalities. All the schools, except Cadence PS, have a community class.

Community class sites are determined at the regional level. This setting is a self-contained classroom for students with severe exceptionalities. For example, Braveheart PS has a community class for students with multiple exceptionalities. Evergreen PS has a community class for students with developmental disabilities. Valishore PS has a community class for students with autism, and Cresco PS has a community class for students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Cadence PS is the only school without a community class. Hayley mentioned that she wished Cadence had a community class because those classes are an important component of a healthy school community. It is important for students in community classes to be integrated into regular school settings, and it is important for all students to work alongside students with exceptionalities.
Another trend worth mentioning is that four out of the five schools were “holding schools” at some point in the last five years. Holding schools take in students from areas where there is not a school for them to attend. Four of these schools were holding schools because new housing developments were being built in their proximity, and the schools for those areas were not ready to receive students yet.

Valishore PS was the only school that was not a holding school, and this is because it only opened in 2012. James talked a bit about the uniqueness of getting to open up a new school. He was thus in the fortunate position of being able to hire the entire staff for this school. He mentioned that everyone there wanted to be there because they would not have come otherwise.

Adina, Joy, and Kalila all spoke about how their current schools ran prior to them getting there. James opened a new school and therefore a before-narrative did not exist at his school. Hayley did not make much reference to Cadence before she got there. After, Adina, Joy and Kalila came to lead their schools, some changes occurred. These changes are noted in their case studies.
Adina Gila, Cresco Public School

Cresco PS is a fairly new school located in this southern Ontario city. It was built in 2004. Adina started working at Cresco PS in 2010, the student population was 400. By the time she left her role as principal there in 2014, this had increased to over 750 students. For the most part, students in this school were Canadian-born, but their parents were not. Many languages are spoken in this community. The school sits in a middle-class neighbourhood. Income levels have grown over time.

Before Adina arrived at Cresco, the previous principal ran structures differently than her. For example, Adina mentioned that special education was not running very well at the school. She further went on to explain that the SERT position was a coveted one by the staff, and perhaps, the flexibility in the role was taken advantage of. Adina said that before her arrival, the IST was not being implemented at the school. This meant that few students were on IEPs, and staffing for special education support was minimal. Only one student had a designated assistive technology computer for her learning. Adina described the situation she walked into at Cresco to be “messy.” In other words, she had a lot of work to do to mobilize the staff to utilize the IST structure to help students experiencing difficulties.

As an experienced administrator, Adina said, “The first thing I do going into a school always is to try to figure out where is special ed and how do I reign that in and put some structure around that.” Her beliefs are that special education is a foundational component to a school. A part of this foundation for her was establishing an IST structure that was infused throughout the school.

After Adina arrived at Cresco, the IST structure became one of her priorities. Her belief
in this structure as a tool to support students and teachers, quickly became evident to the staff as she prioritized the IST within the school. For example, upon Adina’s arrival to Cresco, IST meetings occurred bi-weekly (she synched the IST calendar with that of the school psychologist). This is an example of her ability to make the SERT more effective by ensuring that all the stakeholders were present at the meetings.

The mindset of staff prior to Adina getting to Cresco was one where the IST meetings automatically led to students getting tested. Adina said, “When I got there, the understanding was that you automatically get a psych report and the kid gets identified and the kid is not your problem anymore.” Identifications for students should be the last resort: they can be helped with or without a label.

Adina worked at shifting this mentality of staff. Under the leadership of Adina, the IST became a “problem-solving approach.” She said, “It shifted really more to this collaborative problem-solving approach and there could be any infinite [sic] results from that meeting.” Staff started to see that outcomes from meetings were “infinite,” and they started to invest more into this structure of support.

For example, a recommendation from a meeting could lead to co-teaching with the SERT, or to calling in outside organizations to assist. The Special Equipment Amount (SEA) increased, which shows that staff started to see the value in this equipment for students because they were willing to complete the paperwork for students to get the appropriate equipment.

A regional vision and hearing class was added to the school under Adina’s leadership. This increased the number of special education staff on site. When Adina left, she had 1.5 SERTs for 750 students at Cresco: still a lean number for staffing, but something which she was
able to creatively work.

Adina also worked with flexible models of classes. For instance, she spoke about having a junior kindergarten student come to the school from Early Intervention Services (EIS). This student had a pending autism identification. While waiting for this formal identification, Adina was able to create a primary student support centre for this student to be a part of. This space allowed for him to receive additional help in a smaller setting, which much better suited his needs.

Adina also had her SERT and ESL teacher do some co-teaching. When planning class placements one year, the SERT and ESL teacher attempted to sort students in a way so that they could team teach together. In Adina’s eyes, this arrangement was not as successful as they all had hoped, so they did not do it again. However, she allowed the staff the opportunity to be creative and try something new in the name of supporting students.

During school staff meetings, Adina often layered special education and ESL on to whatever they were doing. For example, when working on the School Improvement Plan (SIP), staff were always encouraged to keep the neediest of students in mind. Adina’s belief was, “Our SIP is not what are we doing to improve the school, it’s what are we doing to meet the needs of the kids whose needs are not being met.”

Like many other participants in this study, students experiencing difficulties (whether formally identified as special education or not) are in the minds of leaders when making decisions. The reason for this is because these students are the ones that are not having their needs met by traditional methods, and therefore require others to think critically and creatively on how to reach them.
Schools are constantly in flux. They experience changes all the time. Adina spoke about how the long time SERT at Cresco accepted another position and left the school. The staff were a bit anxious about this transition; however, one staff member said to Adina, “We are going to be okay because we know differently now.” This staff member was alluding to all the work that went into moving the staff’s thinking forward around the topic of special education and support of all learners.

One technique that Adina applied in her school was sending out staff surveys. These were not mandatory surveys, but one form of communication staff could complete to provide feedback on how things were going with their professional learning. For her, “dialogue” was the number one method for knowing what was working within her school and what was not working.

To facilitate this dialogue with the staff, Adina utilized emails as a form of communication. These emails came to be like a blog to the staff. Adina admits to writing about certain patterns she saw around the school, and asked the staff for feedback, which she welcomed on an ongoing basis.

In selecting the teachers to assume lead roles within the school, she made sure to place people in these positions who were not afraid to challenge her thinking. She did not want a staff to agree with her, and be her yes-people, but rather that genuinely was willing to help facilitate positive change within the school. Adina said,

When I invite people onto the leadership team, I tell them, first of all, it’s a two-year position. If nobody applies in the third year, you can reapply. It’s meant to be rotating over time so you can get as many people involved in it as possible. It’s not owned by any one person for any one division. And I tell them when you apply it’s not to agree with me. If you are on this team, you have to be ready to disagree. You have to be ready to challenge me. It’s a requirement. If you are just going to be a yes-man, you are not invited.
With this type of leadership, Adina found that more students were receiving services than before. She said, “So you know in terms student achievement, more kids were receiving service than ever before.” This shows the change that occurred from the previous administration to when it was under Adina’s leadership at Cresco. Adina further went on to explain that the culture of the school started to change through the work that the IST was doing. More students were receiving SEA laptops to support their learning, and they were not ashamed of having them.

How does a school go from not believing in the IST structure, to believing in it? In the case of Cresco, a passionate leader seemed to mobilize thinking in a new way for the staff. As a leader, Adina learned that her role was sometimes to “[p]artially to get out of the way. I think that is one of the biggest things you can do as a principal. Is listen to what the staff who are doing the work everyday tell you. Listen to what parents say.”

Adina’s wisdom as leader continued to flow through her interview. Talking about her work came so naturally to her. Her insights into leading truly were evident in her presence. Adina said, “For me I always see those children in crisis as indicative of the whole school climate. It’s just they feel it more.” These are the students were truly need to reach because they are an important part of the school community.

I think when Adina said, “They feel it more,” she was acknowledging an intuitive wisdom some students have about their environment. Certain students absolutely feel things more. In other words, they are more sensitive to their environment. Paralleling this comment to my own experience, I have worked with certain students who possess intuition that accurately reflects their circumstances and environment.

Adina also attributed a lot of her success at Cresco to other people. Many supportive
leaders at the regional board level were mentors to her. They helped her with receiving any necessary training regarding learning about how to work with specific students. For example, she is trained in managing student behaviour. Superintendents and Student Service Coordinators were available as confidants to support her when she had questioned.

In response to school climate data taken, the staff really worked on creating a positive culture within the school. Adina believe that it was this foundational work that really got the staff to buy into the idea of team. It was not necessarily her saying we are going to implement ISTs well, but rather a process by which staff started to see that teaming had a profound effect on the school climate, and ultimately on individual students whose needs the teachers were responding to.

Interestingly, Adina pointed out that a lot of special education positions are given to new teachers. This is a common trend occurring within schools. Adina believes that this is a bad idea because these roles are key leadership positions. Adina said,

Special ed, to me, is the key leadership position in your school. Even more so than ELL. And I say more so because of the legislative context around special ed. So the people for me who go into special ed, they are for sure people who have empathy and understanding and will go to the end of the earth for their kids. That I don’t think you learn. I think you are born with that. I also look for people who are structured, who are organized, who are strong communicators, and work well with other people in a gentle way. They have to be people who are welcomed into other people’s classrooms for support.

As key leadership positions within schools, it is important that administrators highlight the SERT role for the entire staff. Adina mentioned that she values having a positive relationship with her SERTs. Their roles are unique within a school, and the staff need to see the value of what they do. Their roles look different from classroom teachers, but this does not mean that they do nothing. There cannot be an image that these roles are a “free-ride.” Adina believes that her staff
came to really respect the lead SERT at the school. This SERT would often lead meetings, and Adina would assume more the role of a team member.

Adina admitted that when she started at this school, special education was not running very well. Out of the 400 students, only two were identified and on individual education plans (IEPs). They had no SEA (special equipment amount) funding assigned to any students. The IST barely existed and IST meetings did not occur. Things were generally chaotic: no real structure was in place at the school for students experiencing difficulties.

Cresco PS was a holding school three times. In a holding school situation, you hire new staff because the numbers increase, and then when the new school in the area opens, you lose staff. The staff usually are moved due to lack of need for so many staff, or choose to move to the newer school. This is hard on a school community because it causes a lot of changes, and not a lot of consistency in staffing. Structures and levels of service that are in place also go through changes.

Adina describes Cresco PS as the “most incredible school.” She said that the staff are learners and they take care of one another. The community is respectful. And the children are polite and hardworking. The arts and athletics programs have been improving year over year. The school just celebrated its tenth anniversary, and 2000 people attended the event. There is a strong school spirit, and the community values the school because it was the first school in this subdivision.

At Cresco PS, there is a high ELL parent population. In meetings at the school, Adina always makes a point to clarify for parents the meaning of different acronyms. Parents need to be able to understand the services that are available so that they can fully access them.
In 2015, Adina worked as a principal for the Curriculum Instructional Services Department at her school board. Her portfolio included learning design and development, as well as arts- and inquiry-based learning. At the time of her interview, she was in her second year in this position. As of 2017, Adina left the board for an important role at the Ministry of Education.

When asked about her beliefs on supporting students experiencing difficulties, Adina said,

I think it’s our job to do it. I think that, especially in communities, like this one, where parents don’t necessarily understand the structures of special ed, ESL and what that support looks like. It’s our job, even if it makes our life harder, it’s our job to give them access. So help them understand the process, help them understand the supports, help them understand what is the child’s right within the school.

She believes that her role as an administrator is to be there for the students. She admits that sometimes she has to be there irrespective of the wishes of the teachers. At Cresco PS, the staff share a similar mindset of helping all students, but she has worked at other schools where this was not the case.

Adina’s background with special education comes from years of teaching swimming at a public school. At this school, many students had physical and developmental delays. Amongst other things, she taught swimming to kids with spina bifida and cerebral palsy. She also worked at camp when she was an adolescent, and specifically worked with students with special needs.

When Adina was a teacher, she always asked to have the more difficult students in her classes. Students identified with LD and ADHD always thrived in her classes. She ran a home school program (HSP), which is the equivalent to a SSC. She would teach these students for 51% of the day, and then integrate them into other subject areas for the rest of the day.

As a leader, Adina believes that it is essential to listen to the staff who do the work
everyday. She said that her role as a leader is to “…partially get out of the way”. This
summarizes her leadership philosophy quite well. She is not a micro-manager, but rather believes
in giving her staff the freedom and flexibility to do the best for their students.

Adina is a learner. She acknowledges that her learning as a principal has come from
learning in crisis. As a new principal, she worked for a couple years at a school which she
described as being “in constant crisis.” She also learned from more experienced colleagues, and
took courses to help her understand how she could respond in different situations. Adina is also a
mother of two children, and can therefore also views her and her staff’s actions through the lens
of a parent.

Adina spoke freely about her beliefs on being vulnerable as a leader. She said, “I think
that by showing where your limits are, people feel safer.” This mindset defines her as a leader.
She also said, “We need to be honest. I’m not going to take this personally, because it’s not
about me. It’s about the kids we are supporting. And so I think that recognizing what I see, and
naming it, in a really non-threatening way and being open to it, and showing my own
vulnerability. [This] allows people to be more honest.”

Adina made sure that IST meetings ran every week at Cresco PS. She heard that since she
left Cresco, this changed. She placed value in this structure as a true problem-solving space
which could be of help to all students. When Adina arrived at Cresco PS, she says that the
mentality was that all students who came forward to the IST were automatically destined to
receive an academic assessment, then a psych assessment, and then a specific identification. She
tried to change this limited way of thinking. The IST is a problem-solving approach with a wide
variety of outcomes beyond just testing.
IST meetings were traditionally run at recess time. Sometimes release time would be provided to staff, if they needed to occur during the instructional day. If meetings ran overtime, someone in the meeting (the vice-principal or a SERT) could cover the classroom teacher, until the meeting was done. They tried to not rush the meetings, and to give the necessary focus it required. By running them weekly, they were on top of the process, so everyone just knew what to do.

For 750 students, there was one full time SERT and one half time SERT. About 150 students were identified with special needs in the school by 2014. The number of specialized computers increased with the number of identifications. Withdrawal programs were run for partially-integrated students. Also, the school opened a regional hearing- and vision-impaired community class, which was unique in that it brought in students with hearing and vision impairments into this school community. This provided an additional layer of diversity to this school, allowing for students to work with students with whom they would not typically work.

Cresco PS is one school that ran an ESL SSC. Adina noticed that students identified as stage one to four ELL were receiving full withdrawal support. This was not something that was necessary. Many of these students were capable of full integration. To formalize the process of where these students would be placed, Cresco PS’s school team held IST meetings. This was a place to track assessments and have an ongoing conversation about how the students were doing. They tried to be responsive and flexible so that everyone was getting what they needed and the classroom teachers felt like they were being supported.

One year, seven students came into kindergarten from Early Intervention Services (EIS) with pending Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) identifications. With such a high number of
students on the spectrum, Adina felt she had no choice but to try a different structure for these students. Often students with autism are predestined to end up in community classes, and Adina did not want this prescribed path for students so young. She also believed that community class settings were not sustainable.

With this in mind, Cresco PS created a primary SSC. At the request and permission of parents, these students worked in the SSC setting for language and/or math programming. Such a flexible model and structure allowed these students to flow in and out of the SSC with support from a SERT.

Adina spoke about how her staff tried to combine ESL and special education together for language. Because of lack of staffing, they had to be creative. The teachers who experimented with this were qualified as both special ed and ESL educators. there was a belief amongst the staff that team-teaching would work, but it did not work out as well as they thought it would. They only tried this model for a brief part of one school year.

When the school numbers were low, Adina tried to have someone who was trained in special ed trained and someone who was trained in ELL in every grade. Then she would place students with each designation with one or other of the teachers. She said that it worked well for a little while, but as the numbers grew it became impossible to maintain.

It then became about mobilizing the knowledge of all staff on site. In staff meetings, for their Challenge of Practice (COP), the focus became about how to support those high-needs learners. Staff would choose what their focus would be. Adina put it this way: “Do you want to focus on science, math, language, do you want to focus on primary, junior, intermediate, do you want to focus on ELL or special ed? And all these different categories started to emerge. Our SIP
was targeted on trying to meet the needs of the students whose needs were not being met.”

As a school, Cresco PS employed a very responsive model within which the staff grew to see and appreciate their own responsibility. Adina said she knew that the structures she had put in place were effective because the staff was willing to play with them and modify them. There was always an ongoing discussion amongst the staff, the students, and the parent community about how to improve things. Staff surveys were completed, but face-to-face conversations were the main form of feedback.

Adina is all about putting things in perspective. She had a whole-picture view of Cresco PS and all the moving parts of this school. She also acknowledges that as educators, we may see students 12% of their year. Kids are usually only at school five to six hours a day. In the grand scheme of things, this is not very much, and yet school has such an impact on how students see themselves.

**JOY BELLAMY, EVERGREEN PUBLIC SCHOOL**

Evergreen PS is a smaller school with a student population of about 300 (at its peak a number of years ago, the student population reached 800). Fifty percent of this population is Asian, and 25% of the population lives beneath the poverty line. The staff consists of one principal (no vice-principal), twelve classroom teachers, one and a half SERTs, three EAs, three caretakers, and one and a half secretarial staff. They have one junior and intermediate developmental disabilities community class on-site.

Joy describes the school as a very positive place to work. Two members on staff have spent their entire careers at Evergreen. Within the staff there are senior teachers who have a lot of experience, and also a large number of newer teachers. Together, they all work to blend older
and newer theories and schools of thought. When asked about what makes Evergreen PS great, Joy responded without hesitation, “The people!”

The staff work hard for the students, making sure that the children’s needs are the first priority. The staff members engage in professional development quite readily and they do what needs to be done. She describes the professional environment of Evergreen PS as collegial and collaborative. She said,

In terms of culture, having been in a few different schools, I would say, this is very positive. They work hard for kids. So decisions are made for the best needs of the children, rather than for the professionals in the building. And there seems to be a really common understanding of that. They go above and beyond what they need to be doing for kids and families. And again, they engage in professional learning quite readily and are quite eager to do that. Really work hard towards having a growth mindset, even when they are frustrated with kids and themselves. Really working towards a collegial environment. There seems to be lot of collaboration amongst the staff. So I’m very encouraged by that.

However, Joy does not believe that this positive climate at Evergreen was always there. Before, she arrived at Evergreen, the school was run by a different principal. When asked about how the positive school culture came about, she replied,

That’s kind of a tricky question because I’m not so sure it was necessarily here when I first arrived. Although I think part of it was, I think from conversations I’ve heard back door, they didn’t really feel appreciated. And so perhaps a different leadership style was needed at one point, and then whatever I offered seemed to maybe blend both of them together. And so I was probably brought in at a time when they needed something a little more positive and upbeat…and kind of nurturing perhaps. The other thing is I think that they have watched the school shrink in size. So it was originally a school of 800, and it’s now a school of 300. There’s lots of young teachers here, with a blend of mature teachers. I only have about two teachers who have been here for their entire career. And having been at other schools, I think that makes an impact because you are fusing some newer theories and newer schools of thoughts, with some experience and maturity to blend the two together. And create and sustain some energy for positive learning going forward.
Joy believes that an area where she “shines” is supporting students experiencing difficulties. She said,

I would say I would probably do whatever I could to support a kid that needed what they needed. Whether that means coaching a teacher that might not have the same mindset. Fundamentally, I believe that everybody can learn. And we need to provide what those resources and supports are. And if we can’t, and we can document that we can’t do it, then we need to bring in outside resources. And we have to be comfortable bringing them in. And not kind of hide what we can’t do. I also believe we are not trying to get rid of kids that are struggling. And so when … I believe when I recommend a child for a community class, it’s because I think I have done everything I can, and it would serve their best needs. Rather than moving them onto someone else to support. I also believe that we need to have really solid relationships with parents. They send us their kids. They send us the best they have. They don’t keep anybody hidden at home. We need to make sure that we’re doing what we can all the time.

Joy knows that high-needs students have a huge impact on the whole school, and these students impact decisions. She states. “It is these students that we have to work harder at reaching”. Joy’s answer gives insight into her personal mindset regarding student support. She further goes on to highlight that no student wants to struggle, and it is the school’s responsibility to prevent this. Joy said, “Fundamentally, I believe that everybody can learn.”

When talking about the importance of teams, Joy said, “It’s like an arranged marriage. Sometimes it can work and sometimes it’s just not ok.” So as the leader of the teams within the school, Joy has to navigate teams all the time. The SERT she hired to work at Evergreen was someone she trusted. She hired her as a transfer from another school. This intentional staffing choice was hers to make when she moved to Evergreen.

Joy believes that stability in the SERT position at a school makes a huge difference. When a capable person is in this role, someone whom people trust, then it’s easier for the
principal. Joy acknowledges, “I’m taking a step back from special ed because I have somebody that is very capable of navigating and managing it. However, I also believe that as a principal, you need to be on top of what’s going on in your special ed department. Always.” This is especially true, given the many legal issues that are associated with special education.

Joy is a reflective leader. When talking about the IST, she clearly presented the awareness that as team members we really need to question the work that we are doing. On her team, she knows to ask, “What sort of holes are we creating, and what do we need to do?”

During her time working with ISTs she has discovered that sometimes it can be difficult for staff to hear feedback from the team about how to support students. Joy said, “It’s really hard to hear feedback. You know people often ask for it, but they really don’t want it. Like honest feedback.” Sometimes, resistance can arise. Joy knows, “Change takes time; we can’t offer a suggestion and say ‘I’ve tried it once and it didn’t work’ because we know that to change behavior or to change perceptions we have try things and stick with it a little bit more.”

There will always be people who resist change. Joy’s mindset is, “No matter where you are, you are going to have people who don’t want to do things. Because they are afraid of change and they get stuck and so you know, it’s always how do you bring them along.” As a leader she wants to build up the self-confidence in those resistant to change, so that they are open and willing to help all students reach their potential.

One of Joy’s pervasive ideas is that she knows as a principal she has to be there along with the staff and not stand above them and dictate. She knows that being there for them and with them has profound effects on the overall positive climate within the school and servicing all students.
Joy notes, “Special ed drives the timetable.” Decisions are made based on staffing and resources for these high-needs students. In Joy’s perspective she believes that the IST process is working to service students. “I think as a board, or even as our school, we don’t have many kids waiting for assessments so in that sense, the process works here.”

Evergreen PS has one SSC and one community class. The community class is for students with developmental disabilities. The SSC services students from grades one to eight, if necessary. At the time of my interview with her, there were only students from grades four to eight identified to be withdrawn to the SSC. The SSC is available for any student who needs the support.

In 2015, Joy had been the principal at Evergreen PS for three years. She describes herself as a positive, upbeat, and nurturing type of leader. The previous principal employed there had a leadership style that was no longer working for the school. When she arrived, both staff and students welcomed her collaborative, people-centred leadership style.

Joy had previously been a SERT for a number of years at a performance-plus school with a high ELL population. She was also a vice-principal for seven years, and in this role her specific focus was special education. She teaches the Special Education for Administrators course for the Ontario Principals’ Council. At her previous school, she piloted the first complex-needs class for the board. Her passion for special education and helping students in need is very evident.

Joy, who has two children of her own, approaches her position as both a principal and a parent. She places significant value on establishing positive relationships with the parent community of Evergreen PS. Her son has been identified with a learning disability. Her perspective on a healthy relationship between parents and the school really came through when
she said,

I also believe that we need to have really solid relationships with parents. They send us their kids. They send us the best they have. They don’t keep anybody hidden at home. We need to make sure that we’re doing what we can all the time.

Joy very much values the belief that “what is necessary for some, is good for all.” If the students identified with special needs in her school are doing well, then she uses that as a marker for how the rest of the school is doing. In other words, if the students with the greatest needs are being serviced appropriately through the IST structure, instructional strategies, etc., then this means that the other students are also almost certainly being successful.

As a principal, Joy says, “I need to be there.” She is not the principal that hides away in her office, while important things are happening in her school. She is involved and a part of the team. She is a learner alongside her staff. When asked about her role on teams, Joy said, “I think that it helps staff to see you as part of the team, and not someone that is just over top of them.” As a principal, she models positive behaviours and mindsets for her staff. Her belief in always putting students’ concerns first, and her open-door policy of inviting staff into her office to talk about their practice, are all elements of her positive leadership style.

Joy’s belief in always making the students’ concerns primary has been somewhat contentious: some staff members have been resistant to change. In her eyes, it is her role to build up their self-confidence so that they are willing to move forward in a positive, engaged manner.

Joy sees student success as variable and child-specific. She believes that success cannot be defined simply in academic terms. She gave the example of a student who struggled to walk down the hall without knocking something off the wall. Through the work of his teachers, this student eventually was able to walk down the hall without doing this. This change was a big step
for this specific child. He was successful at making this positive change, and the staff were successful at supporting him do it. Joy’s belief is that every success, whether big or small, needs to be acknowledged and rewarded.

With regard to class placements, Joy comments that the staff really see the kids as their own. Everyone has a collective responsibility to all the other members of the school. Joy said that at other schools she has been at, there was always banter over who was responsible for which student. This mindset of “these are just our kids” is one that is encouraging, and makes Joy very proud of her tenure at Evergreen PS.

Joy has two SERTs at her school. Her current lead SERT is someone that she hired. I think this is important to note because when the principal personally selects the individual as his or her SERT, trust is established from the outset. Whether this trust is the result of prior experiences working together, or from a referral from a trusted professional, it makes a difference to the relationship.

At Evergreen PS, Joy and her two SERTs meet once a week to review where students are in the referral process. During these meetings, they discuss students who are experiencing difficulties that teachers have flagged as needing attention. They collectively go over student lists, and track where each individual is in the academic and psychological assessment cue for testing. They look for holes that exist or that they may be creating, and what needs to be done to fill in any gaps.

The school psychologist is at Evergreen PS every other week, and full IST meetings are scheduled when she is in the building. These usually occur in the mornings or at lunchtimes. They do not run them during the instructional day, and the staff have been flexible with this
arrangement. Joy was aware that this arrangement could change under the new teacher contract, as was indeed ultimately the case.

In the meetings, the classroom teachers who refer a student to be discussed by the team, present their information, providing work samples, artifacts, and any other data or tracking about the students. At the school, they try to frame the meetings as a problem-solving activity where the team generates new ideas and action plans can be put into place.

Joy believes that it is important to validate the work that teachers have already done before presenting a student to the IST. Many teachers come to the meetings frustrated and exhausted, after having tried a variety of remedial strategies, and she does not want to deflate the work that they have already done. She has noticed that people may ask for feedback, but in fact can resent honest feedback. These meetings are a delicate space, and the focus has to be on trial and error and moving forward with the best interest of each student in mind. Joy notes about her staff, “It’s really hard to hear feedback. You know people often ask for it, but they really don’t want it. Like honest feedback. Like have you tried…? And you can see their back getting up.”

Any resistance from staff members that may arise from the IST structure is dealt with by following the established process, with deep support from the SERTs and administration. Ongoing and follow-up meetings take place, check-ins occur; the whole process is seen as a journey. The staff is gradually learning to recognize that change takes time and that patience is essential.

Joy acknowledges that as a whole system, “We get stuck in paperwork.” This has a huge impact on how fast things can move forward. Growth plans are one form of documentation that is implemented early are used for students to help them make gains. That said, Joy does
acknowledge that the staff could be tighter with writing and implementing them. Overall, this school does not have many students waiting for assessments, so if that is considered a marker of whether or not the IST structure is working, she says that it’s working at Evergreen.

Joy believes to measure the effectiveness of the IST, observations, conversations, and reflections are critical. Ongoing observations of students are telling of how they are doing, and are critical in ensuring that no one “falls through the cracks”. Conversations with her staff about students help them all get a sense of how well the process is working. She acknowledges that students profile in different ways at different times, and so the process needs to be flexible to deal with this dynamic. This creates a flexible model for reflection on what is working and what is not, and how to best move forward.

Joy’s lead SERT is the person who organizes the IST meetings within the school. When Joy arrived at Evergreen PS, she felt like there was some instability in the SERT role because of changing staff. She hired her current SERT, and this person has helped her move things forward and set the structure of how the IST runs at their school. She appreciates that this SERT holds this role because she trusts her to navigate and manage the process, without Joy needing to be overly involved herself. That said, she does believe that, as a principal, she needs to be on top of what is transpiring in her special education department.

Overall, decisions about students in IST meetings are collaboratively made by all the team members. However, there are times when a principal has to make the final decision. Joy thinks that each meeting should conclude with clear next steps set out for what has to be done to help a specific student. Takeaways and to-dos are given to each person, herself included, and when they have the next meeting, members have to report back on what they were tasked to do.
Decisions regarding timetabling and student placement are driven by special education priorities. Students who need SERT support, need to be able to access this support when required, so this means that intentional decisions are made about where these students are within the school. For examples, language and math blocks are scheduled within timetables so that the SERT is available to work with students in the SSC at those times. Not having two full-time SERTs at Evergreen PS, has engendered creative timetabling of staff; this is an important component of the servicing of all the identified students.

It is worth noting that Evergreen PS has moved away from having intermediate students withdrawn for a replacement language and math program in a SSC setting. Joy believes that these students will be in regular classes in high school, and thus should be integrated into grade seven and eight mainstream programs. This provides an opportunity for these students to find their voices in a smaller elementary setting, before they move into secondary school, to practice self-advocacy.

Joy’s experiences with ISTs at Evergreen, and at other schools in which she has worked, gives her insight into some of the inner workings of this structure. From Joy, like Adina, we know that the IST shoulders a lot of decision-making power within public elementary schools when implemented by administrators. Considerations of whether this power is necessary or redundant, and how effective it is, are worth pondering.

**Kalila Ramey, Braveheart Public School**

Braveheart PS is one of the oldest schools in this southern Ontario city. It is a small school situated in a middle-class, white, affluent area of this city. Most students are coming from nuclear families. Braveheart is a traditional school, rich with community culture and heritage. 
This community is tight-knit: generations of families have attended the same school. It is not uncommon to find families in which the grandparents, the parents, and now their children have attended Braveheart PS. This is the only school in the area that has a school crier. Students try out for this coveted position at the beginning of the year, and the selected student wears the traditional red coat and begins each assembly with the ringing of the bells.

Before Kalila arrived at Braveheart, the previous principal had been at the school for six years. Kalila notes, “When I came in as the first principal, after taking over from a principal who had been here for six years. Young, different culture, different background than the traditional teachers that are here. People assume that because of the way I look, I’m white. I’m not white. But it’s interesting how perception comes into play.”

Braveheart is an older school, and therefore some of the teachers on staff have worked there for many years. Kalila acknowledged that it took some of the staff time to adjust to the change in principal. Kalila states, “It really did take a while because a lot of my teachers who have been here…17 years, 22 years.”

Since many of Braveheart’s teachers have worked at this one school for long periods, Kalila noticed that some practices were frozen in time. She had to work with these teachers and say, “Even though you have been here, it doesn’t mean that things have not changed out there. Let’s be responsive to what’s out there. It was called the ‘forgotten school.’ In many ways.” This was “[b]ecause they closed their doors and they did their thing. Then, I came in and blew the doors open.” As a fresh, new principal to Braveheart, Kalila brought in new ideas to the school.

Since Braveheart was a holding school, Kalila introduced a breakfast club. Many of the students were coming to Braveheart on buses, and were hungry by the time they arrived for their
morning entrance. Kalila recalled,

When our first breakfast program came out, the teachers were up in arms. Why are we wasting money? We should be giving this money to a needier school. They didn’t recognize that the needs are shifting and changing here. Now, two years into the breakfast program, if there is one piece of food that is not available, the teachers are like: ‘The breakfast program isn’t complete. What’s going on? Do we need funding? Do you need me to donate?’ Complete shift in thinking.

This example of a shift in thinking demonstrates how Kalila helped to grow the mindset of her staff. Initially, staff did not see the need for a breakfast club, but then over time, this perception changed. Students, who previously were hungry when arriving at school, are now being fed.

This shift in teacher thinking is key. Kalila’s presence at the school encouraged something to change. When asked about the culture of the staff, Kalila described it as a ‘family.’ She said that everyone, including the parent community, is willing to help. “We know who to tap on the shoulder when we need people to help out. That’s one of the biggest things about this school and the parent community, is that I have yet to ask a staff member and/or a parent for help or support in initiatives and have heard the word ‘no’. That makes me work harder as a principal.”

All through the positive changes at Braveheart, Kalila was encouraged to work harder. It was not always easy for her. She lamented about a time when during a professional development day that the staff held a union meeting about her. The reason for the meeting was because some staff members felt like there were too many initiatives and demands being placed on them. The union steward brought the staff concerns to Kalila following their meeting. Kalila’s reflections were as follows,

I was very hurt, not because of the fact that they had all these issues, but the fact that they didn’t come to me. And it saddened me, that I thought I
had built this culture of collaboration and openness, but I realized I had built it among them. And not them with me. I empowered them against me. And that’s a huge leadership flaw that I didn’t realize I was capable of, until I saw it from the outside in.

In Kalila’s perspective she worked hard for her school, the staff, and the students, but this hard work was often perceived by others in different, less positive ways.

After the union steward at Braveheart relayed staff messaging back to Kalila, she learned some valuable lessons about being a leader. One of her biggest realizations was that communication and relationship-building are key to creating a culture within schools that is positive. Staff started to feel more open about talking to each other, and to her. Kalila’s thinking now is, “Let’s address the elephant [in the room]. And I do that in my staff meetings, and I call things out. If I don’t talk about it in my staff meeting, it’s going to be talked about in the staff room. And it’s going to become an issue.”

Creating a culture within schools where open dialogue is allowed amongst staff, students, and families is integral to ISTs. Everyone involved needs to feel like sharing their thinking and ideas are welcomed in a safe space. Creating this safe space is a part of the collective and shared responsibility of all members within a school community.

Braveheart PS is currently a holding school for a school being built. As mentioned earlier, this is one of the four holding schools in this study. The influx of students (who are still awaiting the completion of their own school) from a neighbouring area is resulting in at least a temporary diversification of the student population. The new students coming in are recent immigrants to Canada, and from mostly affluent families coming from mainland China. They are considered by the school board’s standards to be Stage 1 and 2 English language learners (ELL). To further complicate things, as these families establish themselves in Canada, many parents are
working multiple jobs.

As this change in student population occurs at Braveheart PS, you can see two distinct cultures within the school. In assemblies, where parents attend, those families that live within the area and know each other well, sit on one side of the gym together, while those who are newer to the school community, that may not speak English, sit together on the other side of the gym.

Braveheart PS is a school with two SSCs that service primary, junior, and intermediate students. They have three community classes, two of which are multiple-exceptionalities classes, and one of which is an autism-transition room. Students in the multiple-exceptionalities classes are medically fragile. Students in the transition class are temporarily at Braveheart PS, as they transition back into various programs in the public and Catholic boards across the region.

During the summer, Braveheart PS runs the Reverse Integration Multiple Exceptionalities Summer (RIMES) program. Through a partnership with the school board, the city’s Parks and Recreation Department, and the Ministry of Education, RIMES is given funding to run this program for its students identified with multiple exceptionalities. Throughout the program, students from other summer school programs on-site are reverse-integrated with the students with multiple exceptionalities.

Kalila has been the principal at Braveheart Public School for four years. She is young, and is from a different cultural background than the majority of people on staff. She took over the school from a principal that had been there for six years. She admits that when starting at Braveheart PS, she felt how difficult it was to be the new person within an already established, largely white community. Things have greatly improved over the years: when asked to describe the school, Kalila said, “Braveheart PS is like a family.”
Kalila believes in leading by example. When she recognized that the new students coming to Braveheart PS were from Asia, she decided that she wanted to learn more about the education system that these students and their families were coming from. So, with the support of her board, she became a principal for a summer program in China and Taiwan.

When asked about her beliefs on students experiencing difficulties, Kalila said,

I think we are the reason why our students experience difficulties. We judge them. And we judge the fact that that is a difficult thing for them. It may not be difficult. It may be the vehicle that we’re giving them the information is what’s causing the difficulty. I’ve had many teachers say to me, “Well, that child will never be able to read”. And yet you put him in an environment where he has to troubleshoot through a program, or a Pokemon card, or through a card game that he is interested in, and low and behold: he is reading! He or she has been taught to make do with the situation. Not everybody is going to be able to do everything we want them to do. And when we set a certain role for a child or a certain goal for that child, we are imposing our own judgment.

Her views on students experiencing difficulties comes from her years as a student, an educator, and a parent within the school system.

When she was young, Kalila struggled in school: she describes herself as having been a C-student. She had a severe learning disability (LD) and Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (ADHD). She said she bounced around a lot. Things shifted profoundly for her when one teacher simply asked her what he could do to help her. In that simple sentence, he demonstrated that he cared and was invested in her answer and helping her to succeed. Kalila said,

I bounced everywhere. Three quarters of my time was in the principal’s office. Look where I am now. I had one teacher who looked at me, and he said, Dr. V, I’ll never forget him. He goes to me, ‘Kalila, what can I do to help you?’ Do you think anyone had ever asked me that? Do we ask our kids that? You can go to any student here at Braveheart and ask them what do you need help with? Every single one of them will be able to articulate
what it is that they need help with. Why? Because that’s student advocacy. That’s student voice.

Kalila began her career as a teacher working for one school board, and then changed boards when she became a vice-principal. During her time prior to moving into administration, she worked as a curriculum consultant with a focus on literacy. While working on her own doctoral work, she split her time between consulting and working with a group of students with special needs. In addition, Kalila is a mother of two school-aged boys and she acknowledges that her own son has a LD and ADHD.

Braveheart PS begins every school year with a staff meeting that is completely focused on special education. In this meeting, the staff talk about growth plans and exchange plans from the previous year. The entire 23-teacher staff takes a conscious look at the students’ needs, and how to best meet them with placements and services. Teachers are provided with a checklist to help them get to know each student in each of their classrooms.

When it comes to timetabling, the school plans for common literacy and numeracy blocks. Decisions around class placement of students requiring SSC or resource services influences how timetabling happens. There is also a flexible model used with regards to support staff, so that they are available to float where student support is required.

Braveheart PS runs ISTs in a very unique way. Their timetable is set up so that ISTs can take place during the instructional day. This means that few of these meetings occur during recess, lunch, before or after school. With creative timetabling, Kalila has staff within her school cover other staff so that they can attend meetings during the instructional day. For example, if her SERT and classroom teacher are required to be in a meeting, her librarian and literacy teacher may be used to cover the SERT’s SSC class and the classroom teacher’s class while they
attend the meetings. This would be scheduled into their timetables so that this flexibility exists. If “prep payback” is required, meaning if a teacher is asked to cover another teacher during his or her prep time, then this is also appropriately facilitated amongst the staff.

The organization and paperwork for IST meetings are the responsibility of the head SERT at this school. She schedules and invites the necessary personnel required to be at each meeting. This board uses an online management system for all of its paperwork, and this school uses that in conjunction with Google calendar and board email, to organize IST meetings.

The school is committed to a team-based approach to supporting students. Moreover, there is a high level of parent involvement within the school. Parents participate in IST meetings for their child. Student participation within the IST process is also encouraged, especially with students in the higher grades. Kalila states, “When the team is supporting the neediest students, they’re getting to the crux of the matter earlier, behavior is reduced, self-esteem increases, self-efficacy increases, and teacher morale increases.”

This relationship between Kalila and her head SERT at the school took time to establish, but because Kalila worked hard to create an atmosphere of honesty and trust, it has flourished. There needs to be this safe culture, one in which people can respectfully agree and disagree with each other. This is easy to say, but not always as easy to accomplish: in 2012, when Kalila became principal at Braveheart, the political climate was tense with teacher job action in full swing. At this time, the government was at odds with ETFO and its members. This meant that as a principal, every move she made was one made with caution.

When she first arrived at the school, she replaced a male principal who ran things differently than she did. Kalila describes him as a quiet and laid-back leader. The staff
appreciated his style of leadership, and thus she encountered some resistance from staff during this transition, as her leadership style is more hands-on and involved. She was very aware of the interplay between gender and leadership that sometimes is present within management structures. She called it as it was: “You know, an assertive man is boss, an assertive woman is a bitch.”

It took time for Kalila to establish herself at this school. Change took time and took buy-in from the staff. As a leader, she is reflective of her own practice. She knows now that she must be aware of when she is burdening the staff with too many initiatives, and that she needs to listen to what is being said, but also to what is not being said from the staff. Kalila reflected,

I wasn’t listening to those ‘Kalila, are you sure you want to do this [add another initiative]?’ Yes. Let’s go for it...I didn’t listen to the hesitations. I said if nobody comes out and tells me Kalila this is not right, I’m going to continue. Nobody said anything. So I’m going to continue. I didn’t give them an opportunity to talk. That was my biggest [problem]... especially in a small school like this. So if they did not feel comfortable talking to me, they talked to each other. And when they talk to each other, one bad apple [spoils the bunch]…. Right?

Although Kalila encountered some resistance to her leadership style at Braveheart when she first arrived, the staff and her came to a point where more open dialogue was established. She learned to listen to her staff better, which is an essential component to helping students because staff need to work together.

**JAMES HEATON, VALISHORE PUBLIC SCHOOL**

Valishore PS is in its infancy compared to the other schools discussed in this dissertation. In 2015, it was only in its fourth year of existence. It is a multicultural school with no one dominant culture. When the school is translating material for dissemination to the parent community, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil and Urdu are the more common languages it employs,
and are the languages associated with the more predominant cultures within this school of about 710 students. The parent community is actively involved within the school, and on the school council. The area of the city where the school is located is a middle-class community with many dual-income families. There is a small population of parents who are struggling to get by.

Valishore PS has a staff of about 75 adults. This includes teaching, support, caretaking and office staff. For the 2014–15 school year, they had seven full-day kindergarten classes with seven Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs). They also have a primary-junior autism community class on site. Two SSCs service students from primary, junior, and intermediate grades. Valishore PS has about ten percent of its population identified with a special-education identification. That is about 70 students in total.

James describes Valishore PS as having a very positive work climate. Since it is a new school, the staff members who are employed there chose it as their preferred work environment. James described the staff as being collaborative. Grade teams have been intentionally designed so that people who want to work together are connected. James believes in exploiting the wealth of knowledge on staff. This comes from a good mix of seasoned teacher leaders and new teachers just beginning their careers. He says he rarely deals with staff members in conflict with one another. He attributes a lot of this positive climate to the presence of strong teacher leadership. He speaks very highly of his SERTs, and views them as integral members of the overall success of the school.

Valishore has four SSCs. They run a SSC for grade one and two students, and another one for grade two and three students. The grade two cohort has a lot of identified students. There is also a grade four and five SSC, and a six, seven, and eight SSC. The groups range from 12 to
15 students. They are getting close to their size limit. During the 2014–15 school year, James had
a second psychologist come in to help with the backlog of students waiting for psycho-
educational assessments.

James is in his fourth year as the principal at Valishore PS. He is a seasoned
administrator with the board that he works for, and also teaches the principal qualifications
program for the Ontario Principals Council (OPC). He spoke about his time as a teacher with this
same board: he was placed in a community class for three years. The class he worked with was at
the time called a slower-learner class. Students with in this class had a variety of identifications.
Today they would be identified with MID or developmental disabilities (DD).

James spent 25 years working with the Paralympic program. This is important to mention
because, for him, he saw people who were not necessarily successful in academic school areas,
being high-achievers in sports. This is a key piece to his mindset regarding students experiencing
difficulties.

James believes that the school team is the most important thing within his school. He
holds this view because he has been and continues to be part of successful IST processes and
structures. His philosophy of early intervention and being proactive and responsive to needs are
key components to why ISTs under his leadership are able to service so many students.

When asked about his beliefs on students experiencing difficulties, James said, “The
earlier we can identify students, the more likely we are to be successful with them.” James values
early intervention. He further goes on to say, “The sooner we can get to kids, and put something
in place, that supports their learning, the more likely they are to develop strategies around that.”

James is also a parent of two children. His ability to wear both the principal hat and the
parent hat definitely came through in all his answers. His stated, “We [educators] really need to respect that the child belongs to the parent, not to us. That we play a relatively short role in their lives, and we need to do our best, but we need to be respectful of that.”

At Valishore PS, special education drives a lot of structural decisions. For example, when creating timetables for staff and students, the SSCs and those students requiring this service are looked at first. He meets with his SERTs and together they determine the supports that each student requires, and they make subsequent decisions based on these foundational understandings. Literacy and numeracy blocks are determined by the needs of the students who are identified.

When asked about his school’s IST, James said, “The in-school team is the most important thing.” Team meetings are run when necessary, and are organized by his SERTs. He believes that his SERTs’ relationship with the other team members, like the school psychologist or speech and language pathologist, is extremely important. All participants need to have a strong rapport with one another, and to really work as a team.

James has put in place a lot of intentional practices to help his school run smoothly. For example, his primary SERT covers the prep time for his community-class teacher. These two teachers both have special education backgrounds. He will not put someone without a special education background and an understanding of autism in the community class.

Strategic and mindful decisions are made about student placements. Factors such as student-student combinations and student-teacher combinations are all considered in the early stages and all the way along. Once teachers know their teaching assignments, they determine where certain students should be placed. Placing students with the right teacher makes a
difference, and also ensures that one class is not overloaded with too many needs. All of these early decisions affect timetabling. James refers to this whole process as a “snowball.”

Valishore PS had five educational assistants (EAs) for the 2014-15 school year. They will have one less support staff for the 2015-16 school year due to budget cuts. Three of them were specifically assigned to the autism community class, which left the other two to service the rest of the school. In his full-day kindergarten program, his early childhood educators often have to take on more EA-like roles, because the staffing is not available. As a school they are doing the best that they can with the services that they have, but James believes that he needs more staffing support.

Valishore PS’s special education team is unique in that James was able to craft his team exactly as he wanted. As a new school, he was able to hire whom he wanted in these positions. As a school that did not have a vice-principal in the beginning, James depended greatly on his SERTs to be strong leaders beside him.

James believes that it is important that his teachers know that he respects their decisions. Especially with his SERTs, he has developed a relationship of complete trust. His staff know that he has an open-door policy, and they can come to him for advice or support whenever they need it. He is always willing to address difficult situations with parents, if need be. He does not attend meetings where information is being shared. That is something that his SERTs and teachers are able to take ownership of. If the meeting is of a more intense nature, then he is willing to be there to support.

James knew both of his SERTs prior to Valishore PS opening: he brought both of them with him from his previous school. So his trust and confidence in them was built over time, and
was already established long before Valishore’s opening. Having already worked with these SERTs, he already knew their philosophy regarding student support, and this very much aligned with his own educational approach. He is fond of his SERTs and the work that they do, and has no intention of making any changes to this team any time soon.

With regard to the intermediate students who are identified at Valishore PS, he believes in setting high expectations for them. They are working on integrating these students more into the regular program, as opposed to them receiving a replacement program in the SSC. He believes programming needs to be challenging for students, and should be pushing students with a rigorous program to reach their full potential. Students respond to programs that are challenging.

Referring students to community class placements involves significant amounts of paperwork and many meetings. Some families accept and others refuse these placements when they are offered a space. When parents do not accept placement, for whatever reason, it leaves the home school to figure out how to support this student. Parents will sometimes turn down placement because a spot in the community class is only available at another school. Although school transportation is offered to families, some do not want their child in these self-contained classrooms.

James believes that his school board does a great job at servicing students who are experiencing difficulties. The board has provided him additional psychologist support whenever he has asked for it. He teaches the PQP course for teachers from a variety of boards, and many people in his courses from other places mention how long their waiting lists are and how little psychologist support they receive.
Hayley Blythe, Cadence Public School

Like Braveheart PS, Cadence PS is an older school located in an affluent area of this southern Ontario city. The two schools are about a ten-minute drive away from each other, and seem to be experiencing similar changes in student demographics. At the time of this research, the school student population was 520. This is considered to be a smaller school: by comparison, some schools within the region house more than 800 students.

Cadence PS is another holding school. There are two main groups of students who attend this school. There is a group of students who are native English speakers who live within the surrounding school borders. There is also a new population of students being bussed into the school from recently-built condominiums. These students are generally first-generation Cantonese- or Mandarin-speaking students. There is diversity in income levels of the two groups of students. Some are coming from multi-million dollar homes, and others are coming from significantly less affluent living conditions.

Cadence PS recognizes the need to bridge the gap between those who are new to the school and those that have been there for years. Some of the teachers who have been there for a long time have been resistant to change, and this has presented some challenges. For one, the school has had to work diligently to ensure that translation of information is available for those that do not speak English.

Cadence PS has a very upbeat school spirit. Monthly assemblies are held to celebrate all the wonderful happenings of the school. Their music and athletic programs are quite successful. The staff members are supportive of each other and there is an overall positive atmosphere in the school.
Hayley has been the principal at Cadence PS for four years. She is very passionate about special education, and this was very evident during our interview. Hayley believes that the role of the staff in the school, herself included, is to be “service providers.” When asked about her beliefs about students experiencing difficulties, she said,

Well, I see our role, and when I say ‘our role’, I mean the staff in schools, myself included as being … a service provider. So it’s our job to support the children. It doesn’t matter who they are, where they come from, what their challenges are. It’s our job to do our very best, to make it work. And we need to also work in partnership as best we can with the families. So we try to be as inclusive as we can and we’re learning what that looks like in terms of not just having diversity days, but what that’s starting to look like in terms of classroom instruction. I really think that it’s important that there are no barriers to student learning. That’s the core business we’re in. So looking at how we can start to reduce those barriers through effective instruction is another kind of focus is really important when you are dealing with students who are experiencing difficulty, or learn different, or however you want to say that.

Hayley’s philosophy of education is so clear in this quote. She highlights how important it is to help each student, and to remove any barriers that stand in the way of students being able to learn.

Special education has always been important to Hayley. When she was a teacher, working at two different school boards within Ontario, she usually asked for and received the school’s most challenging children in her class, and she found working with them to be incredibly rewarding. When she became a vice-principal, she was mainly responsible for dealing with student discipline. In this role, she believed in prioritizing proactive approaches to support students, and using reactive approaches only when necessary.

Hayley believes in data collection as a way to inform decisions. She spoke extensively about tracking student behavior at a school-wide level. At one school at which she worked, this information was tracked on spreadsheets and housed in a behaviour binder, which was
kept current with the support of an educational assistant. She would analyze this data for trends, and use it to inform decisions made about certain students. Hayley said,

After the report card in January, when I am reading them, I get the Trillium report [card] and I plug that into a spreadsheet and any kid that is identified when I’m reading their report card. I have columns for all their marks and I input all the marks and any comments that I think a little bit suspect. If it’s a comment that needs to be fixed immediately, I will talk to the teacher. If it’s not, but it’s let’s say the child is getting a C and they are on an IEP, then I also book release [time] after the report cards for SERTs and teachers to go through the IEPs and teachers are asked to bring evidence if they’ve given a child a mark that is below a B as to why…So we can make sure the IEP is being followed. Then if it is, then we tweak the IEPs because it’s obviously not working. If it’s not, then the SERT can give more support to the teachers around what they need to be doing to effectively implement that IEP.

Hayley established this spreadsheet method for herself and her school to keep track of programing and assessment of students identified with special needs.

Hayley is very cognizant of the need to align the IEPs with report cards. She has her own tracking on a spreadsheet of the students on IEPs and how they are progressing. She feels this helps her keep track and measure the effectiveness of programing for the students with the greatest needs. Her process helps draw attention to discrepancies that need to be addressed with teachers, but she knows that this course of action cannot be punitive or threatening to her teachers.

Hayley believes that as she has gained more experience as a principal, she has become better able to communicate with her staff; for her part, this means less talking and more listening. She wants staff to see her as another team member on ISTs. Hayley notes that at times it is her job to balance personalities on staff.

Hayley said, “Special education, I find is a thin ledge, if you can really put what is
good instruction there, it will filter out and improve the structure and instruction for all kids.”

There is truth in this statement: if you think about moving a whale, it can be difficult to get an entire whale to change directions. But with a school of fish, you get a few to change direction, and the rest follow. Sometimes you cannot change the entire school (the giant whale), but you can change a few, and those ideas can filter through to others. If special education is the hub of good instruction, then it can move others to follow suit.

Hayley credits the in-school structures at her school to flexible staff. She has two SERTs, one child and youth worker (CYW), and an EA. She comments that this is lean support for the amount of needs they have at Cadence PS. The staff work very closely with each other, meeting sometimes daily to triage what is happening in the school. A lot of their concerns are around supervision of students during transition times and at recess. These staff often are flexible with when they schedule their lunch breaks, and what social skills programs they can offer to service specific students who might be experiencing difficulties. She admits that behaviour logs are sometimes used, but not as effectively as at other schools where she has worked.

Cadence PS has two SERTs who each run their own SSC. They have a primary/junior SSC and a grade six SSC. The school is moving away from an intermediate (grades seven and eight) SSC as a new model. This means that these students are integrated into regular-stream classrooms, rather than withdrawn for replacement programs in the SSC. The thinking behind this is to prepare these students for high school, where SSCs do not exist as a level of support. Students who are withdrawn for SSC programs receive language and/or math support from one or the other of the two SERTs. With intentional timetabling and efficient scheduling, the SERTs are able to provide in-class resource support to students, when not teaching in the SSC.
When asked about having a community class at Cadence, Hayley said, “I had two at my last school. I’ve asked for them, repeatedly, because I find that it really helps the culture of the school in terms of fostering that empathy from the other kids and staff. And also it’s nice because you’ve got additional back up staff, expertise in the building that you can rely on.” Unlike most schools in this school board, Cadence PS does not have any community classes on-site. Hayley believes that community classes help a school culture because they foster empathy throughout the school. In addition, the expertise that community class teachers provide is a great resource.

In the fall, Hayley gives release time (when an occasional teacher covers another teacher’s class) to her SERTS and teachers to write IEPs. She feels that this is an important structural decision that supports the collaborative writing of these documents. This release time does require intentional scheduling on her part to ensure that she can offer this time to the staff. Release time is also provided to the SERTs and teachers following report cards, to make any adjustments to the IEPs.

Hayley says that her IST meetings are planned around the schedule of the school psychologist. This is a strategy that she implemented when she joined the school. About twice a month, Cadence PS schedules IST meetings. These usually take place during recess time, and the staff has been very accommodating in being available for this time slot. Due to prior commitments, there were times when Hayley was not able to be present at these meetings. In these situations, her vice-principal would attend in her stead.

There was initially some resistance on the part of some members of the staff, who were concerned that the meetings were evaluative of their teaching practices. At one point, the union had been contacted about these concerns. It has taken awhile to build trust amongst the team
members: they have had to navigate how to give and receive feedback without feeling threatened by it. Over time, the rapport amongst team members has increased, and people are working more collaboratively.

The relationship between Hayley and her SERTs is one built on “complete trust.” It is essential to have a strong belief in the good intentions of all participants for the good work that needs to be done to occur. This concept of mutual trust is a foundational component to the IST structure at Cadence PS. Hayley also believes that her SERTs need as much professional training as possible so that they can be experts in their craft. She is willing to invest the time, energy, and money in sending them to any training required. Hayley also says that she trusts her SERTs enough to host in-school training for the other staff, without her being involved. She thinks it is important that the staff have their own space to learn together without her involvement as their leader.

Hayley and Joy from Evergreen PS organized professional learning days between their two schools. This collaboration between these two staffs was organized because both schools are fairly small in size, and thus joining the two groups meant that more collaboration could occur between grade teams.

Class placements were discussed as another school structure that requires a lot of intentional decision-making and flexibility in making it work. Where students are placed and with whom they are placed is always intentional. It is important that students are in the best environment to do their best learning.

Looking forward, Hayley knows that she has a couple of students who were offered community-class placements for the following school year, but families turned them down. Since
Cadence PS has such high EQAO scores, and such a strong academic reputation, most families do not want their children to leave their home Cadence PS to attend another school. Cadence PS does not have any community classes available on site, and decisions about community-class placements are made at the board level by a student services coordinator.

Hayley acknowledged that her own children have special education identifications. Like, Kalila, she is able to relate to the IST structure as both an educator and as a parent. Hayley said “I can tell you from my own children's experiences. I have two children who are identified with LDs. High school was not a happy place for them.” Her own experiences with getting her children support did not sound positive, and thus it makes sense that she works hard to ensure that the students in her care get what they need. It is important that additional barriers are not created for students and their families when moving through the IST structure of support.

When asked about whether or not the IST structure is working at Cadence, Hayley said, “At this point I would say every teacher has been in and brought a kid to team over the last two years. Whereas I was told in the past, there were certain people that never did. So that’s good.” From her reflections, it appears that more educators accessing the IST to support students, which is clearly a positive outcome.

In this chapter, I shared the participants’ thoughts and voices on the IST structure within their schools. The case studies are a representation of the findings and results gathered from the five participants and are meant to describe the experiences of these individuals. Since completing this data collection in 2015, these research participants have continued to excel in their professional lives. Adina works for the Ministry of Education, Joy works in a regional leadership role for her school board, and Kalila works for EQAO. James retired in 2016 and Hayley works
for the Ministry of Education. Chapter 5 is a discussion of findings that surfaced throughout this work.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

- Albert Einstein.

This discussion is meant to contribute to ongoing dialogue about the IST structure. It is also meant to add to discussions about sociocultural theories of learning and identity construction within schools, as well as to the discussion on how more holistic and ethical practices can exist within the public school system, thus providing an integrated support network for students who require it.

This chapter focuses on the research outcomes that have emerged from this research. The investigation of the intersection of students experiencing difficulties with the IST structure was meaningful, because it offers a glimpse into what happens when these students are brought into a team-based support structure. I hold that the following broad claims can be made regarding IST structures:

1. Principals are integral to effective implementation of ISTs.

2. When they are implemented in holistic and ethical ways, they can engender profound, positive and long-lasting psychological, emotional and intellectual outcomes.

3. When the IST structures do not perpetuate stigmas, stereotypes, or streaming of students, there are far more positive impacts on the student.

4. The IST space is only effective when it is used to help students overcome challenges, rather than creating new ones for them.
I chose principals as my interview subjects because I am convinced that the effectiveness of the IST structure in any given school is a function of the quality of the leadership of that institution. The voices of my participants showed this idea to be true, because as leaders within their schools, they demonstrated how their implementation of the IST structure helped students get support. They each serve as a gatekeeper at the threshold between students getting support and students not getting support.

Returning to Holland et al’s (1999) figured worlds framework, our identities, whether as students, teachers, administrators or parents, are social and cultural constructs which both define and constrain our behaviour in a multitude of ways. Becoming aware of these implicit socio-cultural mechanisms, and by extension questioning their taken-for-granted nature, is the first step towards a fuller, freer existence, both as educators and as students. With this in mind, it is worth asking: Do labels help or hinder the work we do in assisting students to become their best selves?

This is an essential question to ask at this point in this work, and I confess that I am still ambivalent about this. As a graduate student, I might say that labels are not necessary because they are too constraining. As a teacher in the public system, I might say that labels are required for students to get the support they need to be successful. Our current economic structure in the public system dictates that students need to have formal identifications for funding to be allocated to schools to be implemented for specific students. Working within this system, I know that students need to go through the IST process to get additional help. Therefore, the answer to this question is multi-layered, and arguably child-specific.

As I have stated earlier, I believe that my most important role as a teacher is to engage in work that helps students self-actualize the best version of who they are. In so doing, I too
become capable of reaching my highest potential. This idea of self-actualizing is intentionally nebulous, precisely because it refers to a quality – or rather a collection of qualities – unique to each individual: an intuitive introvert will self-actualize in a totally different manner than someone who is brash and extroverted. But there are certain fundamental aspects to a healthy psychology that can be nurtured, such as empathy, kindness, self-confidence, creativity, self-empowerment and self-discipline. Good academic outcomes are much more likely to occur when these qualities are exemplified by teachers and nurtured amongst the students.

My data were collected, sorted, and analyzed using modified grounded theory methods. The data was then layered with figured worlds theory to provide a perspective that acknowledges the hidden layers of social and cultural norms pervading school life. This is the theoretical framework that pushed me to explore the identity politics within my topic and this study.

First, I examine the IST structure at the school level. This provides the means to take a closer look at the work that my participants are doing, and summarizes some of the main themes that have emerged from my interviews with them. Second, I discuss my work at a macro-level, ‘zooming out’ to provide some perspective on and analysis of this work and its implications at a societal level.

The most interesting findings that emerged from this research are the following (I have summarized each of these findings with a catch phrase that summarizes each of my points):

(1) Caring in schools matters. Students are not just names on paperwork. Getting to know the learners as people, not just in their socially-prescribed role as students, is fundamental to the work done in schools. (*Caring Adults and Knowing Your Learners*)

(2) The IST structure is only as effective as the people who implement it. The structure alone
has no power to engender positive change without the necessary human resources behind it. (*Connectedness*)

(3) When the IST structure is implemented, it is important to look at how the practices in place are safe within the context of the school culture. It is our responsibility as educators to initiate safe interventions when a student is struggling. A piecemeal approach that does not consider students as complex, multi-faceted beings will always be inferior to a holistic approach that does not focus solely on cognitive outcomes, but also on the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the student. (*Safe Spaces and Vulnerability*)

(4) Self-aware educators who process a growth mindset are those needed to mobilize student growth. These educators are those who work to remove barriers to learning, and help students make gains in all areas of their growth. (*Growth Mindsets and Awareness of Practice*)

These findings are deconstructed and explained further going forward. That said, they ultimately lead back to this idea that students experiencing difficulties require appropriate holistic interventions. Rightly or wrongly, educators, and parents for that matter, make choices each and every day for their students and their children. When the intention behind these choices comes from a pure place, in that they are thoughtful and ethically sound, then students are given the opportunity to become the best version of themselves.

However, in this same line of thinking, the approaches used to help students cannot be seen as top-down interventions that adults make for these students. This is why students should be involved in decisions about their education and well-being, and should be taught how to self-advocate. Fostering students to be active members in their own lives sets them up for future
independence and success.

**ISTS at the School Level**

Sometimes the choices we make on behalf of students and families produce positive results and sometimes they do not. Often good intentions, in combination with right interventions, can result in positive outcomes for the students; sometimes, even though all parties are well-intended, things can go sideways in a hurry. As educators, we make choices all day long, right or wrong, because to not make choices is a choice in itself that can also have negative repercussions. It is therefore contingent on us to accept the consequences, good or bad, of what we do. I do not want this research to encourage apathy. We have to respond when we notice a child is struggling, and experiencing difficulties.

This story that I am telling is about how these principals mobilized their staff to believe in the IST structure as a means to help students make gains in their academic, social, and emotional lives. I believe that principals are change agents. As leaders within a school, the board, and their communities, they serve as difference-makers with regard to how structures are implemented within their schools.

Four of the five principals took over at schools where the IST structure was not being implemented as effectively as required. For example, each of these four principals spoke about how IST meetings occurred infrequently prior to them working at the school. These four also spoke about less special education equipment and resources existing at their schools, and that growth plans to move students forward were not being implemented.

As stated earlier, James became principal of a new school, and therefore a comparison from before he got to the school and after cannot be made. However, he made some intentional
decisions in designing his school from the beginning that support his belief in having an effective IST in his school.

After each of these principals took over at their elementary schools, change did occur. For example, IST meetings became more frequent. There was an increase in special education equipment, such as computers for students with exceptionalities. There was also a better understanding of how the referral process works, and the steps necessary to get students the support they need to make gains.

So how was this done? Each principal had his or her own style of leadership to infuse the IST structure into each of the schools, as a structure that encouraged a shared responsibility of all students. However, some similarities also exist amongst each of the participants. For instance, all the principals had an intentional-staffing policy. Other elements of their successful strategies include:

• Leading with integrity,
• Effective and efficient support,
• Additional time,
• Intentional planning and programming, and
• Timely results: students get what they needed faster.

All of this good work encouraged the staff to ‘buy in’ to the IST structure. Although staff voices are not present in this study, the principals stated that students were getting more individualized support and in a faster manner. This occurred because staff saw the value in sharing the responsibility of helping each student in their care.
The case studies in Chapter 4 are snapshots of what these principals experienced at their designated sites. None of these principals are working at these schools at the present time. It is out of the scope of this research to know if in any of these given schools whether the IST structure continues to mobilize shared responsibility. However, it is assumed that when implemented with some of the themes and strategies enumerated below, that the IST is one structure in the public elementary school system that can truly get staff to assume holistic responsibility for each student.

Several themes surfaced from the data collection, but I have chosen to write about four main areas in this discussion of outcomes. Based on the study results, this following section focuses on four different components of what I believe are key elements of a successful holistic IST framework:

(1) Caring Adults and Knowing Your Learners,

(2) Connectedness,

(3) Safe Spaces and Vulnerability, and

(4) Growth Mindsets and Awareness of Practice.

Without these components, working with the pre-existing IST structure within the public system, there are gaps in service for support students experiencing difficulties. Just a side note, these areas of discussion are thematic findings, not necessarily practical suggestions on how to execute ISTs on a day-to-day basis.

When the above four emergent themes are taken into consideration within ISTs, then a more well-rounded and holistic IST occurs. In other words, when all of these elements are at the
forefront of leaders’ minds, as they implement and execute ISTs within their schools, then bureaucratic structures can become more holistic in nature.

**Caring Adults and Knowing Your Learners**

I use the term ‘adults’ here, instead of ‘educators’, because it is a much broader term, and applies as well to other adult stakeholders who are not necessarily educators. It also acknowledges that parents and other professionals participating in supporting students are essential in helping students make positive gains.

Noddings (1992) writes about care in schools: “To care and be cared for are fundamental human needs. We all need to be cared for by other human beings” (p. xi). Further to this, she adds “A caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for” (Noddings, 1992, p. 15). Similar to Noddings’ argument for care in schools, Mayes and Williams (2013) write, “Care means reverence for who the student is at his core, gratitude for the chance to help him expand his intellectual horizons, and excitement at seeing the student make an idea his own, and in his own way, and then fold it into his own life-story in order to vitalize his existence” (p. 111).

A well-structured IST is a conduit for care in schools. In other words, if care is the foundation of the IST structure, then a continuum of care can exist for students. This means that students get support in a timely and effective manner, where the help is not temporary, but rather ongoing, holistic, and meaningful. No student falls through the cracks, because support, resources, and recommendations are all documented and shared from one staff member to another, and from one school year to the next. I worked for a principal who would have called this “passing the baton,” as in a relay race, and not letting it fall to the ground.
As an educator, you may refer a student early in the year to be sent off with suggestions to try, and then return for a follow-up meeting. This process can happen with multiple students, and for multiple years, before that student has finally reached a point of stability. The process can be tiresome and the paperwork can be daunting, but teachers generally do what needs to be done to support the students. This is especially true when they are invested in the process of the IST structure and are committed to a caring ethic.

However, as much as the IST process can seem endless, it is the responsibility of educators to do what is necessary to help students. This does mean working within the structures that are put in place from the board and the Ministry to get students what they need to be successful.

This research found that the ISTMs facilitate necessary dialogue between team members to mobilize support required to help move students forward. As Adina said when talking about writing IEPs for students,

I would love to have a pre-meeting where we all sit down together and depending on the age of the child, involve the child, in that conversation. And I think that there should be monthly meetings like that with the very high-needs kids with parents and whomever they want to bring in. It’s really a support model, instead of, my team versus your team.

Caring demonstrated in this way within a holistic IST facilitates a model where the whole child is addressed by a comprehensive team of professionals.

There are always those people who feel like meetings are a waste of time. Whereas this is a far too generalized statement, it contains a grain of truth. In the context of ISTMs, they should not be about the paperwork, beyond what is deemed necessary by schools for various reasons, but rather about making sure students are getting the best care and support they can be offered. This requires educators to know their learners not as abstract entities but as individuals.
Knowing ourselves as educators is one piece to authentically connecting with others. Authentic connections require educators to be vulnerable. Knowing our learners is an essential component of authentic connections. It is axiomatic that, as a teacher, the more information about students that I have, the more I can help them. The more my programming and teaching are informed by the data, and the better those data can be, the better I am able to synthesize this information in ways that help me deliver a more customized, individualized program for each individual student.

**CONNECTEDNESS**

Humans are social creatures, and cannot thrive in isolation. Connecting with others is essential to our psychological and emotional health. It follows that in a healthy school environment, connectedness exists between teachers and their students. This can occur when we recognize that above and beyond all of socially defined roles as teachers, administrators and students, we are all human. The best educators realize this: Palmer (1998) writes, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (p. 11).

There is a multitude of ways for people to connect. For instance, people gather in the physical sense for celebrations, meetings, or specific causes. That said, there are profound qualitative differences in different situations: for instance, much deeper connections are generally forged among people in a sing-along than in a meeting to discuss test scores, and students will have a much deeper sense of connectedness when they are engaged in a mindfulness practice than when they are looking on their smartphones.
To be clear, I am not suggesting that serious discussions be replaced with sing-alongs and satsangs, but that all of the participants nonetheless acknowledge the essential nature of connectedness when working with students experiencing difficulties. The IST structure spans across communities. For one, a teacher within his or her classroom community identifies students who are experiencing difficulties. Then theses students are referred to the IST, which is a school-community level of support. It affects the larger community, because each of these students has a family.

The students who are identified within a school play a pivotal role in telling how other students and staff are doing within in the school. If we are using instructional strategies that follow an UD as the learning model, in which “what is necessary for some, is good for all,” then we see this expressed in all aspects of the school culture. As Joy states: “If I need to know how my staff is doing, I can measure it by how my special ed kids are doing, often. Because we know about instructional strategies … necessary for some, good for all. And so if we use that context of special ed, then we can make sure that everybody’s getting what they need.”

The needs of a learner are specific and unique to him or her. It is important to remember that the work of ISTs is intended to be individualized for each student that is discussed. A strategy, recommendation, or resource that works for one student, may not work for another. This is definitely where matters get tricky, because there are only so many human resources available to be shared, and these individuals are the ones required to create connections and relationships.

SAFE SPACES AND VULNERABILITY

It is essential that the IST be a safe space for everyone involved. For this to occur, the ISTM must be a vulnerable space of intersection. Displaying one’s vulnerability can be an asset
rather than a liability: as Brown (2015) writes, “Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it’s having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness, it’s our greatest measure of courage” (p. 4).

Firstly, ISTs are vulnerable spaces. Given the content being discussed at these meetings. The students being talked about are struggling in some way, and the team is meant to problem-solve on how to best move students forward. In these conversations, voices and documents, like report cards or medical notes, are used to provide context for labelling students as experiencing difficulties so that they receive support from this team.

Secondly, ISTMs are vulnerable spaces for students, in that it is they who are openly being discussed among team members. Their strengths, needs, and interests are all discussed and are all laid out on the table for people to see, witness, and judge. By extension, they are also vulnerable spaces for the students’ parents, who are often overwhelmed and sometimes riddled with self-doubt.

This space also holds that the professionals around the table have to be willing to be vulnerable as well. It is through this vulnerability that students can be supported because everyone is open to embracing the uncertainty of what the next steps will look like in the journey helping students become successful. But it is impossible for people to open up in this manner if they do not feel entirely safe and supported. This can only occur in an environment in which all judgment is cast aside and all are accepted as equals. This requires the development of deep listening skills, in which one learns to quiet the discursive part of mind that wants to provide an ongoing commentary when another stakeholder is making a point.

As an educator, to admit you have a student in your care who is struggling and whom you
cannot help, requires you to feel safe enough to ask for help. Adina spoke about this in her interview where she said,

Teachers, for the most part, just want to be successful. They want to help the kids. And when they can’t, different things can happen. They can hate the kid. And I’ve seen that, and I’ve heard teachers say horrible things about kids. But that’s not because they really don’t like the kids, it’s because they don’t like how they feel around the kid. They don’t like that they're not able to support the kid. And so my role as a principal is to make that person feels okay. And let me come in and help you. And you know, I think that builds trust, because they are allowed to be themselves and be honest.

Adina believes that the way she encourages trust within her school is to be vulnerable herself as a leader.

**GROWTH MINDSETS AND AWARENESS OF PRACTICE**

Fixed mindsets represent a deficit model of thinking, given that they ignore the reality that identity is fluid, and never fixed. Dweck (2006) writes, “A fixed mindset is “… believing that your qualities are carved in stone” (p. 6). A growth mindset is one based on the belief that “… your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (p. 7).

In these frantic times, with the pace of technologically-driven life getting ever more frenetic, with disruption becoming the norm and stability becoming the exception, our individual and collective identities are ever more dynamic. If we are locked into very narrow and specific ways of responding to students’ needs that do not acknowledge the fluid nature of identity, we will ultimately not succeed in providing the best, most responsive interventions.

But at a deep level, self-aware educators – ones who acknowledge the fluid nature of identity – ultimately have the freedom and choice to constantly change who they are. As Dweck (2006) states, “You have a choice. Mindsets are just beliefs. They’re powerful beliefs but they’re
just something in your mind, and you can change your mind” (p. 16).

As educators, we need to be aware of our own mindsets. Awareness of our practice gives us power to grow and to be responsive to the needs of the students in our care. It allows us to see the dynamic, multi-layered social tapestry expressing itself in the school environment. A self-aware teacher will acknowledge that he or she is, like the rest of the student population, on an ongoing journey towards greater understanding. With this in mind, we must be cognizant of how what we do affects others. We need to be aware of how the structures we implement affect the students for whom they are designed.

To put it simply, fixed-minded teachers will encourage the development of fixed-minded students, whereas as a teacher who is growth-minded will inspire his or her students to explore and be transformed in their inner and outer worlds. As Dweck (2006) states: “The great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning” (p. 194). “Fixed-minded teachers often think of themselves as finished products” (Dweck, 2006, p. 201). As educators, this type of thinking is limiting and outdated. It is too narrow for educating students for a world in which change and disruption are the norm.

An example of a fixed mindset was shared by Joy. She mentioned that sometimes students receive a label as early as kindergarten (this could be either a formal or informal label), and because her school is so small, that label sticks with the students for his or her entire elementary school career. Being typecast a certain way, can make it difficult for others to see your potential. Joy laments,

When you work in a small school everybody knows each other. So you really do have to kind of come together. And understand, you know the one kid that might have some learning problems. The kids kind of nurture them along and understand where they are coming from. And I think the teachers do too. Downfall of that, kids can sometimes get labeled. So if a
child had an issue in grade one or kindergarten, that sometimes seems to stick with them. Those memories of that kid in grade one is still the memory of that kid in grade 8. We have to get away from some of that. This inability to see that a student in kindergarten and grade one is somehow the same student in grade eight is such a fixed mindset thinking. Students are not static in their identities or their abilities.

Cresco PS held the common belief – one that is pervasive in many schools – that if, as a teacher, when you express concerns about a student, and bring them to be discussed at an ISTM, this will trigger a process whereby this student becomes someone else's responsibility. As Adina says, “When I got there [to Cresco PS] the understanding was that you automatically get a psych report and the kid gets identified and the kid is not your problem anymore. So that was the mentality. And it shifted really more to this collaborative problem-solving approach and there could be infinite results from that meeting.” The moment that one adopts a broader, more holistic approach with an understanding that the outcome of meetings can be multi-layered, is when collaborative problem-solving can occur.

Adina talks about how she knew the structures they were trying at Cresco were working. In regard to the IST structure, Adina said,

I think it’s successful because it made us think and made us reflect. We’d have conversations; we’d talk to the kids, we talked to the parents. We’d make sure… I sent out surveys to staff… in terms of is this working, isn’t working, what would you want to see better? Honestly, we always had dialogue. So you know in terms of student achievement, more kids were receiving service than ever before. And kids would talk about what their needs were.

To support students who experience difficulties has a lot to do with mindset. Adina frames her beliefs as an administrator in regards to supporting these students. Her response sheds light on
the reality that not everyone is of the same mindset in how to support students, so she plays a pivotal role in perhaps being the IST’s ‘moral compass’, and being there to navigate supports for students and families.

When asked, “What are your beliefs about supporting students who may be experiencing difficulties, whether it be special ed, ELL?” Adina responded:

I think it’s our job to do it. I think that, especially in communities like this one, where parents don’t necessarily understand the structures of special ed, ESL and what that support looks like. It’s our job, even if it makes our life harder, it’s our job to give them access. So help them understand the process, help them understand the supports, help them understand what is the child’s right within the school, even if the teachers don’t like it. So I think that when you become an administrator, you really have to be there for the students. And not just, ‘I’m there for students, but to the detriment to teachers’. You have to be there for the students. At Cresco, it wasn’t an issue because the teachers were right there with me. They were of that mindset. But when you work in schools where teachers are not of that mindset, it creates a huge dissonance on staff. I think that you know we have to figure out, it’s our job, to serve those children. So we have to figure out what it is that they need in order to be successful. And I use the word ‘success’ in the broadest sense. Because it’s not necessarily what I think success is. But what do the students, parents, and the staff, together see as success.

Researchers Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, and Christensen (2006) propose “…that inclusion focuses on the transformation of school cultures to 1) increase access (or presence) of all students (not only marginalized and vulnerable groups), 2) enhance the school personnel’s and students’ acceptance of all students, 3) maximize students’ participation in various domains of activity, and 4) increase the achievement of all students” (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 259).

A project called Supporting Effective Teaching (SET) began in 1992. This project looked at:

(1) teachers’ beliefs about disability and their roles and responsibilities for students with disabilities; (2) teachers’ practices in core subjects in their classrooms; (3) their practices in accommodating students with disabilities
and those at risk of school failure; and (4) the influence of the school norm, that is, the collective beliefs or prevailing ethos of the administrators and staff in the school about their roles with and responsibilities for all students (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 260).

It is this educational ethos that has an impact on students. This is why leaders with growth mindsets are needed to shift the sometimes outdated mindsets of others to the realization that students in our care are all the responsibility of all educators.

This requires leaders to be up-to-date on new learning theories and practices so that they are able to pass this knowledge onto their staff, students, and the parent community at large. When a teacher moves into a vice-principal or principal role, he or she accepts this role and needs to assume all the responsibilities that are associated with it. A part of their responsibility is to accept that their mindset can never be fixed, because this does not foster educational growth for those that they lead.

**ISTs at the Societal Level**

As educators, we need to think deeper about how macro-decisions, -choices, and -policies affect our students. This discussion on the societal level of my topic emerged more from viewing this work through the lens of a figured world. This study conceptualizes that the identity of students experiencing difficulties are socially- and culturally-mediated identities within the figured world of school.

Figured worlds theory questions how the school-level work is a part of a larger system. It questions the identity politics that exists within the IST structure. In other words, students become identified as “experiencing difficulties” because someone has told them that they are struggling, or they have learned that they are experiencing difficulties in more complex socially-mediated ways.
Stereotypes and stigmas can become a part of this identity. Certain students come to be known as the ones who are struggling, or have specific identifications, and stereotypes and stigmas come from assuming these roles. Marks and grades can become tools for stratification. As educators we need to be aware of how the structures and interventions we implement affect students at the personal level. This next section discusses identity politics and social stratifications.

**Identity Politics and Social Stratifications**

Figured worlds theory leads us to think about how ISTMs are a place where student identities are constructed. Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain (1998) define figured worlds as: “…a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). The ISTM is a place of interpretation where decisions are made about the students (‘characters’). In this setting, educational professionals become the authors of the identity of “students experiencing difficulties.”

McDermott and Varenne (1999) explain how a student named Adam would not be labelled with a learning disability if there were not specific structures in place to name him that way. They write,

Adam could not be disabled on his own. He needed others to recognize, document, and remediate a disability that had to be made ‘his.’ More important, without a culturally well-organized apparatus identifying a certain percentage of American children as officially Learning Disabled, Adam could simply have been what he was, namely, a person who learned differently or on a different schedule than others (p. 26).

I draw upon this quote to highlight that school structures, like the IST, have an influence in creating identities for students. These identities, viewed positively or negatively, impact the
student and how he or she views self, and how others come to see him or her.

Positional identity describes the interactions between people that are mediated by a person’s situation in relation to others. Conversations and interactions are the tools of how social position and social relations are constructed about self, in negotiation with others. As Holland et al (1999) put it,

In the groups that we studied, as in any group engaged in jointly creating and participating in a figured world, day-to-day practices always positioned the participants situationally, relative to one another. That is, participants in collaborative activities – be they staff members producing a treatment plan in a mental health clinic, old hands welcoming a new-comer to an AA meeting, or a romantically involved couple going out to see a film – engaged in conversation and interaction that invariably constructed their own social position and their social relations with one another (p. 133).

Their findings are important to keep in mind when related to the conversations and interactions that occur on ISTs and in ISTMs. Similarly to Holland et al’s examples of AA meetings or going on a date, the interactions between people are largely responsible for constructing social positions and social relations.

When IST members engage in conversations and interactions regarding students experiencing difficulties, they are constructing their identity as team members with one another. They are also constructing the identity of the subject being discussed. It then becomes a space where social position and social relations between team members are mediated by these conversations and interactions.

The IST members gather in meetings to discuss students. These meetings usually take place in the office conference room at the school. These spaces are the setting of these meetings, and are themselves a figured world. Dialogue is the main conduit for how ideas are constructed.
and formed within these meetings. It serves as the vehicle for how the story within the meetings is constructed and exchanged. Within these meetings, the characters/team members discuss students who are brought forward as needing support from the team. In these discussions, every word that is exchanged, every artifact that is shared (student work samples, etc.), all contribute to how the student is constructed as someone who is experiencing difficulties. This construction is the story of who they are to the other people within the room.

The IST meeting is a space where authoring of students occur. In this space, voices come together and collectively construct the student’s identity. The discussion among the people around this table constructs a version of this student. The student is authored for the purpose of the IST.

In large part, students come to know that they are struggling because we tell them they are. Educators evaluate students, in the form of marks and comments, and they come to know themselves as struggling because they learn it from the system. Remember back to when Kalila said,

I think we are the reason why our students experience difficulties. We judge them. And we judge the fact that that is a difficult thing for them. It may not be difficult. It may be the vehicle that we’re giving them the information that is what’s causing the difficulty. I’ve had many teachers say to me, ‘Well, that child will never be able to read’. And yet you put him in an environment where he has to troubleshoot through a program, or a Pokemon card, or through a card game that he is interested in, and lo and behold, he is reading. He or she has been taught to make do with the situation. Not everybody is going to be able to do everything we want them to do. And when we set a certain role for a child or a certain goal for that child, we are imposing our own judgement.

Kalila’s statement highlights how factors like student interests, teachers’ beliefs about students, and the environment all impact how a student is constructed. The judgements of educators can easily limit students’ ability to succeed.
In some schools, there is a belief that students are to blame for their difficulties. This is deficit thinking. In the schools focused on in this study, the principals shifted this thinking, if it did exist, through the implementation of the IST structure. The IST displaces the ‘blame’ from the child, and truly looks at things more holistically. It gets professionals to determine how to help the students with where they are, and to foster an environment that is conducive to learning. This may require staff to look at their programming and their methods of instruction.

However, as a practicing teacher, I know how difficult it can be to reach each and every student each and every day. Some activities engage certain kids and some do not. I will say that technology typically engages them all. We need to acknowledge the role of technology in education, but there need to be limits, given that students are highly prone to spending too much screen-time. A balanced approach is essential. Moreover, it is key to realize that programs will often need to be customized to accommodate the needs of specific students.

For example, Freddy does not like to paint. He profoundly hates the smell of paint, the texture, and the messiness of it. The rest of his grade one class loves to paint. So Freddy is also given the choice to choose a different medium to work with. He typically picks pencil crayons. His entire class loves to play at the park, but Freddy at the park tends to walk the perimeter of it, usually alone. He does not like the park.

I point out these examples just to show that teachers must make choices all day long about what to do with students, and in every choice, not everyone’s needs may be met. Teachers do the best they can with what they have. When they do what they do with conscious awareness, perhaps, imbalances, gaps, or fragmentations are less likely to be created.
Structures of stratification should be considered as a part of the power behind what we implement. How do we ensure that ISTs are not marginalizing students? Brantlinger (2006) writes, “Labeling is about politics, power, and representation” (p. 233). As educators, there is a danger in making assumptions about our students. This is why accurate documentation and observations are necessary to comprehensively represent the whole child. However, in doing so, educators need to be reflective about how politics, power, and representation are at play when labeling students.

Brantlinger (2006) raises the point that when we apply medical models of thinking when working in special education, the focus problem becomes something within the student that needs to be addressed, rather than with the systems and structures in place (p. 234). In other words, when professionals diagnose students, the problem is seen as residing within the students (embodied by them), as part of their biology, as opposed to issues associated with the students’ environment.

When psycho-educational assessments are administered by school psychologists to students, a bell curve is used to determine where the student scores/ranks on this curve. There is an unspoken aspiration to be average on this curve because then you fall into the norm, you are not different from others, and you will not get a label. Below average would mean falling into a category with an exceptionality assigned to it, like a mild intellectual deficit or a developmental delay. If you place above average, labels like giftedness are assigned. Brantlinger (2006) raises an interesting point about averages within the school system. She writes, “…averages and norms are theoretical, statistical constructs not meant to define particular children and especially not all children” (p. 238). According to this view, averages are a construction, just like those identifications assigned to represent the numbers that a student scores on assessments.
Brantlinger further points out that averages can be fixed or unstable (p. 237). This means that what is determined and defined as average, can be fixed for specific purposes, but can also be changed for specific purposes. Across school boards, the percentile score that students require to qualify for a specialized gifted program can vary. One board might say that the percentile score is students who fall above the 97th percentile, while another will say it is the 98th percentile. This adjustment to this score is based on political reasons, as well as staffing, class sizes, and resources. This can work like a positive feedback loop, in which assessments reinforce the idea that numbers and definitions can be adjusted to fit desired purposes.

So with this in mind, if what is considered average, below average, or above average is arbitrary and can be adjusted, then we need to look at why certain norms and averages are set, and by whom they are set, and whose agenda they serve.

Remembering back to Adam (on page 136), the authors argued that he would not have been labeled with a learning disability if there were not structures in place naming him that way. There are systemic reasons to why stratification layers exist within schooling. We need to make sure that the labels and structures we use do not hinder students. We need to be reflective of the structures and discourses we use around students who are experiencing difficulties.

This discussion of outcomes explored the IST structure at the school level and at the larger societal level to encourage dialogue on how the work that is done daily within schools is impacting schools and students. This chapter is meant to foster questioning of the current practices in place, and the political spaces within which these practices exist. I believe that the IST structure needs to be holistic and ethical in its implementation, so that it can be an effective tool for schools and families to access the best possible supports, resources, and programming.
available for students to self-actualize.

Returning to Mona and Freddy: as these students move forward in their educational journeys, and transition from one grade to another, it should be the responsibility of the IST to ensure that these students do not fall through the cracks. As a new school year begins, the IST could set up a meeting with all necessary professionals and their families to support Mona and Freddy’s transition and ensure that no gaps are created or left unsupported. This support is what I believe is the foundation of creating holistic and ethical ISTs. ISTs are a structure that ensures no child is left behind, that interventions are seamless and effective, and that the whole child is ultimately cared for within the school.
CHAPTER 6: FINAL THOUGHTS

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In a sense, it is difficult to conclude this work, because throughout this study, deeper ideas emerged that I did not expect, and I believe that this topic is fertile ground for much more research. As often happens in any deep inquiry, one’s final destination is not necessarily the one that was mapped out in the very beginning. Below, I summarize my research including my premises, my methodology, and the conclusions from the synthesis of the data I collected, and I discuss briefly the directions for further research.

In this qualitative study, I engaged with five elementary school principals to explore the qualities that make an IST structure successful in addressing the needs of students experiencing difficulties. The learning that emerged from these principals was:

1. The IST structure is working within their schools because of the good work done by the people behind the structures. This included them as the leaders to mobilize their staff to believe that this support structure is effective in getting students the help they need to be successful.

2. Shifting staff thinking to ‘buy in’ to the IST structure takes time.

3. Formal and informal leaders are needed to execute the action plans and recommendations that come from ISTMIs about students.

4. Each student is unique and different, and therefore a strategy or resource that works for one student may not work for another.

These emergent findings from my participants shed light on some key pieces to consider
when implementing ISTs within schools. I think that if the IST structure is the support system in place within public elementary schools to help students, than it needs to be holistic and ethical in approaches and execution. However, this is not to say that this structure is perfect or would be perfect under these guises. If public education within Ontario is pervasively neo-liberal, then the bureaucratic nature of the IST is just one of the components of such an education system. The daunting paperwork, for example, that exists when tracking students is an onerous example of how bureaucratization plays out within the educational system. One has to consider whether or not this actually helps students, teachers, and families.

I am a reflective practitioner, both as a researcher and as a teacher. I believe that it is incredibly important for me to be conscious of the work that I do, and to think deeply and carefully, about it. I admit that sometimes I almost certainly have my own blind spots, and this is why I believe that research and teaching cannot happen in isolation. Likewise, the work of helping students, whether by accessing the IST or not, cannot happen in isolation. The IST does allow for multiple people and resources to be called upon to help, and for this reason, I support its place within schools.

**The Research Process**

I love research. I love designing it, executing it, and most of the time, writing about it. I used semi-structured interviews with the participants in my study (i.e. the five elementary school principals) in order to develop a more in-depth understanding of their practices regarding ISTs within their schools. I also simultaneously examined my own relationship with this research and the topic of school structures through the use of a reflective journal.

Throughout my journal, I noticed that this research process was cathartic for me. Over the
years working in special education, I often came up against some thinking of others whom I did not understand or agree with. For example, some professionals are deeply entrenched within the political and bureaucratic patterns of thinking that often are found with larger organizations like school boards. When exposed to this, I did not question it. As a newer teacher, I learned to fall in line and take direction well. However, as I became more knowledgeable about certain practices, I started to form my own opinions regarding educational practices.

As my thinking evolved, and I started to express these ideas more stridently, I found that many people within the system did not want to hear what I had to say, and were not willing to delve deeper. I think in part this is because within the system there is so much going on, and oftentimes decisions and actions have to be made in an expeditious manner. So my journal allowed me to explore all my thinking, in a safe and non-judgmental way. As Behar (1996) states, “When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably” (p. 16), and therefore I will share an excerpt from one of my journal entries.

On October 26, 2016, I wrote a journal entry that was written in a stream-of-consciousness manner. In September 2016, I returned to teaching grade one after a one year leave to work on my PhD. I talk about creating growth plans for my students, which are documents that outline areas that students need to work on and recommendations on how to support them. Growth plans are created in conjunction with parents, and parents are meant to sign them. Students usually work on their growth plan expectations for four to six weeks, prior to being discussed by the IST.

My researcher’s journal became an important tool for exploring insights into my research and my teaching practice. I know now that keeping a journal about my practice is fundamental to
being a reflective practitioner and I would highly recommend that all researchers employ this data collection tool as part of their research process.

One of my journal entries reads:

Since I have been back in the classroom, I see how hard it is to find time as a classroom teacher to create growth plans, meet with families to share them, execute them. Then move them forward through the referral process by bringing students forward to the IST.

Knowing how draining and how busy the daily grind can be, I wonder how students are better able to be supported through this process. I wonder how teachers are better able to be supported through this process.

Now that I’m back to teaching, I see the IST process as something entirely different than when I was off as a grad student. I value the IST structure as a teacher. I mean, there has to be something in place to catch kids when they need more help.

My doctoral journey has been a busy one. So many ups and downs, right turns and left turns. However, I wouldn’t be where I am or able to critically, ethically, and authentically analyze my work without all the roles and positions I have held.

When I began the doctoral program, I was teaching as a special education resource teacher (SERT). During my coursework, I ended up taking a six-month position as a special education consultant with a focus on technology. From there I returned to a SERT role, teaching younger students this time around. I completed my coursework and then assumed a twelve-month contract as a technology teacher. During this time, I wrote and passed my comprehensive exam, wrote and passed my thesis proposal, wrote and passed my ethical approval. I then returned in a six-month position as a community class teacher for students with various exceptionalities. I completed my data collection during this time. All set to write my dissertation, I took a year off from work to write. 14 months later, the dissertation is not written, and I am back to teaching. This time as a primary homeroom teacher. It is my evaluation year.
In my homeroom, I have 20 students. They range from reading levels 0 to about 14. Their range of abilities is vast. My lower readers are receiving specialized reading support. It is October and the gaps between students understanding and not understanding the curriculum is growing.

My special education training tells me to get the students on growth plans fast. Start moving them along the referral process because many of them are going to need all the support they can get. And then, there is this other side of me, that can’t help but think…maybe I need to let these students find their way. Isn’t that what New Age teaching is supposed to be about? Letting students find their way. Discover, inquire, explore…

I don’t want to watch students struggle. The reality is that these kids will one day have to function in our fast paced world. So how do you find a balance between teaching the individual and teaching the curriculum? Teaching in the present and teaching for an unknown future? All these things I ponder, all the time, in the midst of signing agendas, and changing the date on the board.

In addition, I looked at documents used as part of the IST process and online school sites to learn about the communities in which the research sites were located. Using these data sources helped me come to a deeper understanding of the work that goes into making a structure work, and the value of that structure when it is effectively designed and maintained.

Following recent elementary contract negotiations, ISTMs are now required to occur during the instructional day. The principal must creatively find coverage for classes so that specific teachers are to attend these meetings. This new protocol was not in place when data were collected. So many of the meetings prior to 2015 occurred before or after school, at recess or at lunch, during teacher’s personal time.

Next, I share the implications and recommendations that emerged from this research. I
also discuss some of the strengths and limitations of this work, and research that could be pursued in the future. Finally, I synthesize the importance of this study beyond these dissertation pages, and how my practice as a teacher has changed and evolved as a consequence of this research. It is essential for practitioners, myself included, to ask questions of the structures we implement. Ineffective and negative practices are often perpetuated out of sheer systemic inertia, and if no one questions their value, they will often continue unabated.

I will also provide some insights and talking points for future discussion on this topic. Awareness of our practices and the structures within which we work gives us power to question and grow. We cannot ever be careless as educators. We have a responsibility to be aware and conscious of the consequences of our behaviours, our words, and our actions. There are individual human beings behind all the work that we do and that cannot ever be forgotten. We can never underestimate our influence on those in our charge: students often come to embody what we tell them they are.

If I knew in the past what I know now, I would have positioned myself differently within ISTs that I sat in on. However, it was an underlying intuition that brought me back to OISE to study ISTs through a holistic lens. Holistic pedagogy has allowed me to think differently about how schooling could and should be. Holistic pedagogy is balanced pedagogy.

When the systems in place impose a certain structure onto the people within the system, we need to look critically at what that does. The IST may not be mandated, but it is implemented. How it is implemented is interpretative. Even the overall purpose of the IST is open-ended. Often data collected on effectiveness are reduced to a set of numbers. But I think that it is ultimately the voices of the people in the ISTs that tell us if something is effective or
not. They are the ones living it each day, on the ground, dealing with the reality of it all.

All institutions are built on and employ any number of different structures. But those structures are only as effective as the individuals who work within them. This is exactly what the data from my research revealed. The people behind and within the IST structure cannot be forgotten. Amidst all the paperwork and dialogue of ISTMs, real-life students exist. Perhaps, rather than bogging down educators with so much redundant work, the focus should be on refining teaching practices and programming to be more organic, holistic, and authentic.

In some way or another, the participants in this study made the following points:

1. The IST structure is working within their schools because of the good work that the people behind the structures put in. Things are only as effective as the human resources behind the implementation, tracking, etc. of students.
2. Change takes time. Sometimes people are going to resist change, and that is to be expected. This inherent resistance can be used as a form of communication.
3. The leadership within the school, whether it is driven by the administration or by teacher-leaders, all matter to what the IST looks like at and how it is implemented.
4. Individual experiences matter. People are all unique and thus the work that we do for each student needs to be specific to him or her.

**Implications and Recommendations for Elementary Schools**

Several important findings emerged from this research. Some of the implications of this study with regard to the effectiveness of ISTs appeared early on in the data collection process. Other findings appeared throughout the transcribing, coding, and then analyzing phases, and yet more implications emerged while writing the different sections of this paper, or while sitting on
the train, or, for that matter, in the middle of the night. I acknowledge that some of ideas that I propose would require additional time, money, staff, and energy that may not exist on the ground level within schools. I cannot disregard the teacher-practitioner in me who did not realize that this work bordered on practitioner inquiry in many ways. I struggled with trying to separate my researcher hat from my teacher hat, and found this internal conflict helpful, and perhaps even a privilege to have.

ISTs should be holistic in nature. These teams should be following whole-child pedagogy, where they support the entire student (mind, heart, body, and soul). Such holistic thinking is, I believe, essential for the people working within the system. This means that educators need to be aware of the power that ISTs can have on constructing student identities.

We need to consider reevaluating the use of labels within schools. The identifications that the Ministry and school boards use to name and categorize students are too narrowly defined. These terms frame what the students are not able to do, rather than highlighting their strengths. Deficit thinking is fixed, rigid, and has no place within current-day education.

Sometimes, students of concern are seen as having something wrong with them on the inside. However, there are so many reasons for why a student could be struggling. Factors such as the school environment, programming, and instructional practices all need to be evaluated. This implies that educators need to be reflective about how their choices impact student learning.

Reflective practices, at all levels of leadership and throughout all components of structures, need to take place: The priority must always be the student's’ well-being. This is only accomplished when the whole IST team employs a clear, collaborative approach that is informed by both quantitative and qualitative data that are comprehensive and that can provide sufficient
context regarding decisions made on the student's' behalf.

Teachers who work for the public system work within a political machine. They have to follow the policies and procedures and structures in place, because they are paid to do so. However, they should be allowed to critically question practices imposed upon them – we cannot be docile when working for educational change.

When IST meetings are scheduled to occur within the instructional day, then they are positioned as a priority within the school because professional time and resources have been allocated by administrators for them to take place. Principals who are creative with their staffing models, their budgeting allocations, and their timetabling, are flexible in experimenting with what works at their particular location. The principals in this study acknowledged that the structures within their schools are most effective when they are fluid and flexible. Sometimes, the lack of resources, time, and money can be factors in how effectively best practices can be implemented.

Relationships were a central theme that emerged from the data. When principals have a positive collegial relationship with their IST members, then working together is easier. Having authentic connections between team members, with students, and with families, added the human dimension that structures sometimes lack. Trust matters in collegial relationships, to be able to work together and to move forward with student support. In the midst of implementing a support framework, it takes a lot of courage to say something is not working, and to try something else. To do this a certain level of trust needs to exist amongst all participants.

The IST is one of the main pathways for interventions for students requiring additional support in elementary schools. If early intervention of services occurs for students experiencing
difficulties, then they receive the necessary supports in a timely manner. However, care needs to be ongoing. It cannot take on a stop-start model, where support is just reactive, rather than proactive. When students are involved, things have to be differentiated and specific.

Supporting students should be a shared responsibility. The majority of the workload should not fall on one staff member. We must work with the notion that supporting students is a shared responsibility that includes, but is not limited to, administrators, teachers, parents, families, and the greater community.

Moving towards a mindset whereby the whole student is a collective responsibility for all parties involved returns to the pastoral belief that it takes a village to raise a child. In the past, before industrialization became the norm, people lived in smaller villages and it was the collective responsibility of all villagers to help raise the children. In schools, a similar thinking pattern could exist.

**Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research**

Minimal research exists on ISTs and thus a strength of this study is that it opens up the discussion on this topic, hopefully encouraging others to begin to question the structures in place at the elementary level to help students experiencing difficulties. I think this research begins to make links amongst several themes that emerged throughout this study. For one, these principals explained how their beliefs in the IST structure mobilized their staff to believe in the good work that it can do, and ultimately encourage school cultures to assume a more shared responsibility of each student within the care of their school. Another link involves taking a more macro-look at how structures within schools, and the people who implement them, can influence student identity.
The main limitations to this study were the result of some problems that occurred while trying to get ethical approval from school boards during spring 2015, due to the political climate at the elementary level because of job action at that time. There were also concerns that, as a union member, it might be difficult to interview fellow union members during that period. It was suggested to go through my union for approval as well.

The solution I employed was that I adjusted my research by removing school board ethical approval. I resubmitted my research to the university for new ethical approval. This process narrowed down the participant pool. Prior to this change, ten participants were going to be interviewed: five principals and five SERTs. In the end, I interviewed five principals, which provided a more focused, streamlined, and consistent participant group.

Five willing participants agreed to be a part of this study. I was worried I would not find willing participants during the spring and summer of 2015, due to the rising political tensions occurring in public schools. My response rate was low, but I believe that I found the perfect principals for this study. Following transcription of the interviews, each participant was given the option to review their transcript for accuracy. None of the participants provided feedback.

Future research specific to IST meetings would be valuable. There are so many entry points into this topic, but two main ideas for future research could be:

1. An ethnographic study of the dynamics that exist within ISTMs. I hypothesize that this research would share insight into the power dynamics that exist in these meetings. This study should be allowed to share the voices of all participants on the team, and delve deeper into how discourses about students shape outcomes.

2. A practitioner inquiry on the ethical and moral practices employed by IST members. This
work could explore the equitable and inclusive experiences (or lack of) for educators, students, parents, and even families.

There are a plethora of entry points into the topic of the IST within Ontario public elementary schools. My wish is that other graduate students, who are also trained teachers, will explore this topic further, because there is so much to consider about this structure that this research could not have possibly touched upon it all. I have learned from this study that it is my responsibility as an educator to question practices that make me feel uneasy.

In critically looking at how IST structures can construct student identities, I do not want to minimize the good work that ISTs can do. I simply recommend that the people implementing structures be aware of the power that their positions hold with regard to student outcomes. If how we frame and identify students affects how we intervene, then we need to be careful, conscious, and aware of how this framing and identification process affects student outcomes.

For the IST process to work, schools need people to believe in it, and for that to happen, we need people to do the work to make it effective. We need leaders who will fearlessly fight for the time, resources, and staffing needed to get all students what they need. We need teachers to push things forward, do the work, and help these kids. We need human resources that are effective. Our current education system works with a formula where students need to be identified as needing support for support to be provided. Ultimately, we have to work within the system to help students, and to forge the best path forward, given the constraints inherent in this system.

Investigating my topic has shown me that sometimes, even with best of intentions, we are not always supporting students in the most effective of ways. But we try anyway. If we try from
our heart, from a place of genuine care for the humans we encounter in our practice, then we will be able to truly move things forward. We will be able to invoke positive change because we know that it matters in the most profound of ways.
REFERENCES


http://resolver.scholarsportal.info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/resolve/00016993/v55i0001/73_soaaavsdwtstd.xml.

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Tara Kumabe, and I am currently a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto (UT). I am conducting a research study under the supervision of Dr. Jack Miller, Professor in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning (CTL) Department. The title of this study is *The Impact of Teaming on Student Success: Portraits of In-School Team Structures*. This email outlines some details of this inquiry, and an invitation to contact me, if you would like to participate.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to establish a deeper understanding of the structure of school-based teams at Ontario public elementary schools, and the impact of this teaming on students experiencing difficulties. Qualitative methodology will be used in the form of interviews with principals to collect data on how their school structures support student success.

**Details of Participation:** This research seeks to find five elementary school principals, who have two or more years of experience in administration. Ideal candidates possess some background in special education. For school principals, who work for the York Region District School Board, please be aware that this organization does not endorse this study. Your participation in this work is a personal choice, outside of your employment with this board.

Participation in this study will involve a one-hour, semi-structured, face-to-face interview with each participant, at a time and location that is convenient to the participant. During the interview, the participant will be asked questions about structures within their school that support student success.

The interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to text. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school boards, and communities cannot be identified. All raw interview data will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study. A copy of the Informed Consent Form that all participants are required to sign is attached to this email.
Confidentiality: Please know that your confidentiality is assured. Pseudonyms will be used at all times, and any identifying data will be deleted to protect the identity of each participant. Additional information related to confidentiality and the secure storage of the interview data is described in the attached Informed Consent Form.

If you are interested in being a participant, or if you have any questions about the study, please contact me directly at tara.kumabe@mail.utoronto.ca.

Thank you,

Tara Kumabe
Ph.D. Candidate
Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Department
OISE/University of Toronto
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

Thank you for offering to participate in this research project. This letter explains what is involved so that you can make an informed decision about taking part. My name is Tara Kumabe and I am conducting a research project for my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Jack Miller from OISE at the University of Toronto. This study is called: The Impact of Teaming on Student Success: Portraits of In-School Team Structures.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to establish a deeper understanding of the school structures that exist at Ontario public elementary schools, and their impact on students experiencing difficulties. Data will be collected using qualitative methods (interviews) to construct written portraits of how each principal structures their school to help student success.

Each principal will be involved in a one-hour, semi-structured, face-to-face interview at a time and location that is convenient to you. Interviews will need to take place in a fairly quiet space to allow for audiotaping. A workroom at a public library would be an ideal spot. The time of the interview can be before, during, or after work, in the evenings, or on the weekends. This will depend on what works for each participant. During the interview you will be asked questions about your experience supporting students experiencing difficulties.

The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed to text. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a secure location. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, and communities cannot be identified. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study.

You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from this project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a principal. Please feel free to ask any questions, at any time, about this research and your involvement with it.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [my_email]. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Jack Miller, [supervisor_email]. Finally, you can contact the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant.
participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca. For school principals, who work for the York Region District School Board, please be aware that this organization does not endorse this study. Your participation in this work is a personal choice, outside of your employment with this board.

Thank you in advance for your participation. Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed for this study. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Tara Kumabe
Ph.D. Candidate
Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Department
OISE/University of Toronto

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in this study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Name: _____________________________________

Signed: ____________________________________

Date: ______________________________

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Upon completion of this study, if you would like to receive a report on this research, please provide your email address here: ______________________________
**APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Main Research Question:** How do current school structures affect the success of students who are experiencing difficulties in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Questions:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tell me about your current school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What is the student population like?</td>
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<td>- How would you describe the current school culture?</td>
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<td>- What makes your school great?</td>
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<td>Tell me about your beliefs on supporting students experiencing difficulties.</td>
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<td>What is your experience working with students experiencing difficulties?</td>
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<td>What is your experience working with special education?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Structures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What structures do you have in place in your school that supports students experiencing difficulties?</td>
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<td>Are these structures effective? Why or why not? How so?</td>
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<td>How do you measure their effectiveness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who implements these structures?</td>
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<td>How are decisions made about implementation of these structures?</td>
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<td>What does special education look like at your school?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Teaming and School-based Team Questions:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have school-based teams at your school that support students experiencing difficulties?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you call these teams?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do they look like?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How are school-teams structured at your school?</td>
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<td>What are your roles and responsibilities on these teams?</td>
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What do these teams do?

**Perceived Effectiveness:**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you find your teams effective? Why or why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there any issues or challenges you face when implementing certain</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>school structures like school based teams?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What additional supports could be put in place to better support school</td>
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<tr>
<td>structures and teams at your school?</td>
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**Other Thoughts/Comments/Etc.:**

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any additional thoughts/comments/etc. that you would like</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>to share?</td>
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