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# An Investigation of the Attitudes of Catholic School Principals towards the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback that aided in the development of this article.

## **An Investigation of the Attitudes of Catholic School Principals Towards the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities**

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*Catholic school principals typically serve as the prime decision-makers in admission and enrollment issues. A key factor in this decision-making can be the principals' perceptions and attitudes about servicing students with disabilities within a Catholic school context. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of Catholic school principals toward inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. Overall, a majority of surveyed principals reported a positive attitude toward including students with disabilities. Some significant relationships were found between principal's previous experiences with students with disabilities and the principals' willingness to enroll students with disabilities. Implications for practice are presented.*

Keywords: Catholic schools, principals, inclusion

Since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004), there have been a number of changes in the rules and regulations guiding the provision of special education to students with disabilities who attend Catholic schools. These shifts in the laws have made the provision of special education services more challenging for Catholic schools, which do not receive federal funding to administer special education services. Other than the services defined and developed through the Proportionate Share Plans as determined by the timely and meaningful consultations with the local educational agency (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Catholic schools are often left to find local funding sources and grants to provide programs for students with special needs (Defiore, 2006). The inclusion of students with disabilities and the provision of special education services can prove to be a substantial drain on the resources of Catholic schools.

As a result, decisions about whether to include students with disabilities can be challenging for Catholic school principals. Catholic school principals

typically serve as the prime decision-makers in admission and enrollment issues. Principals must balance the admission of an individual student against financial constraints and faculty professional development needs. A key factor in this decision-making can be the principals' perceptions and attitudes about servicing students with disabilities within a Catholic school context. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of Catholic school principals toward inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools.

## Literature Review

### Principals and Attitudes Toward Serving Students with Disabilities

There few references in the research literature regarding Catholic school principals' attitudes towards serving students with disabilities (Huppe, M., 2010; Taylor, S., 2005). However, a wealth of evidence within the literature suggests the importance of the role of the principal in the provision of services to students with disabilities (Dyal, A., Flynt, S. W., & Bennett-Walker, D., 1996; Gameros, P., 1995; Lasky, B., & Karge, B. D., 2006; Ramirez, R. C., 2006). Further, the research on public school principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities can inform the current research on Catholic school principals' perceptions.

As Doyle (2001) contended, "Many assert that all schools, programs, administrators and staff members need to be inclusionary. What they are calling for is more than a change in structures but a re-culturing of the way people think about school and students with disabilities" (p. 4). In Gameros's (1994) study investigating successful inclusionary practices, public school principals reported that they believed their leadership and vision had a significant impact on the provision of services to students with disabilities in their schools. Further, Dyal, Flynt, and Bennett-Walker (1996) asserted, "school principals play an important role in creating an educational climate that provides opportunities for interactions between disabled and nondisabled peers" (p. 33).

The public school principal's attitude toward students with disabilities has a significant impact on the effective provision of special education services. Several studies have noted that for inclusion to be successful, the public school administrator must display a positive attitude and commitment to inclusion (Evans, Birst, Ford, Green, & Bischoff, 1992; Rude & Anderson, 1992). Praisner's (2003) study on public school principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities found that "positive experience

with students with disabilities and exposure to special education concepts are associated with a more positive attitude toward inclusion” (p. 136). With these more positive attitudes and experiences with students with disabilities, principals are more likely to place these students in less restrictive environments.

To be competent administrators, principals should have a fundamental knowledge of special education as well as knowledge of current issues in special education (Wakeman et al., 2006). The need for professional development on special education topics for principals in the public school arena has been well established (Collins & White, 2001; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Lasky & Karge, 1995; Monteith, 2000; Sage & Burrello, 1994; Smith & Colon, 1998; Strahan, 1999; Valente, 2001; Valesky and Hirth, 1992). However, as Wakeman et al. (2006) suggested, there is little actual professional development in special education provided for public school principals. In addition to knowledge of special education, Ramirez (2006) suggested that the principal—as the instructional leader and agent of change—must possess other competencies, such as, “skills in effective instruction, assessment and discipline to provide support and feedback to teachers as they develop environments for teaching heterogeneous groups of students” (p. 63).

### **Catholic School Principals and Special Education**

Statutory and regulatory changes in the IDEIA regarding the delivery of special education in non-public schools have proven to be challenging obstacles for Catholic schools. Students with disabilities enrolled in private schools by their parents are not entitled to a free and appropriate public education under IDEIA. The IDEIA does not require school districts to serve all children with disabilities enrolled in private schools. Instead, school districts are required to spend a proportionate share of their federal funds on students who are enrolled in private schools by their parents. If school districts provide this proportionate share, they meet their obligations under the IDEIA, even if all eligible children are not served (Russo, Massucci, & Osborne, 2000).

Despite these financial challenges, there is evidence to show that Catholic schools do serve students with disabilities. The primary findings of the USC-CB (2002) study, *Catholic School Children with Disabilities*, found that nationally, 7% of children enrolled in Catholic schools are children with disabilities, compared to 11.4% enrolled in public schools. When comparing disability types, Catholic schools enroll a greater percentage of children diagnosed with

high incidence disabilities (such as hearing impairment or deafness, developmental delay, speech/language, uncorrected vision impairment or blindness, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments) than public schools (USCCB, p. 11). However, Huppe (2010) notes that low incidence disability categories such as mental retardation, autism, and emotional disorders have a “significantly lower representation in Catholic schools than in public schools” (p. 128).

Bishops’ statements at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB, 1972, 1998) and the United States Catholic Conference (USCC 1978) provide an impetus for Catholic schools to serve children with special needs. For example, the U.S. Bishops released a framework of access and inclusion of students with disabilities in which they asserted:

Since the parish is the door to participation in the Christian experience, it is the responsibility of both pastors and laity to assure that those doors are always open. Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty. (NCCB, 1998, p. 2)

The Bishops clearly support the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. However, as Moreau (2006) asserted, “the financial realities of providing services for children with special needs in our Catholic schools are a major barrier to building effective programs” (p. 467). The inclusion of students with disabilities presents a moral dilemma. Long and Schuttloffel (2006) described this moral dilemma as a “tension between the social justice value to include all students and the social justice value to provide adequately for these students’ learning requirement” (p. 445). These authors also highlighted factors that Catholic schools must consider when making decisions regarding students with disabilities: “how best to accommodate these children in the mainstream life of the school, what resources are needed, and how best to obtain these resources” (Long & Schuttloffel, 2006, p. 448).

Catholic schools may not only face financial barriers to including students with disabilities, but may also be “limited in their capacity to meet the needs of a diverse population of learners due to an underlying belief on the part of many Catholic educators that children with special needs would be better served elsewhere” (Moreau, 2006, p. 468). Weaver, Davis, and Landers (2006) argued that, “the focus on the inequities in funding between public and private schools often provides an opportunity to justify the inability to provide

services for children with special needs” (p. 469). Certainly, the American Bishops have noted the value in the interaction between those individuals with disabilities and those without. In such an interchange, “it is often the person with a disability who gives the gift of most value” (NCCB, 1998, p.1).

Despite the financial strain of serving students with disabilities that many Catholic schools can face, there are Catholic schools that embrace inclusive approaches within their settings. This suggests that these schools are finding creative solutions to these issues. As Weaver, Davis, & Landers (2006, p. 467) observe:

The pockets of excellent practice that are evident in many Catholic schools demonstrate that Catholic school teachers and administrators can develop an attitude of inclusiveness as well as problem-solving models that allow excellent programming and accommodations to develop in settings that are not funded adequately.

### **Methodology**

There is an implicit tension between the call for Catholic school principals’ sense of justice to include students with disabilities and the practicalities of how to do this with integrity. The challenges to providing students with disabilities a Catholic education, however, may not be solely financial. As Weaver, Davis, and Landers (2006) wrote: “The moral mandate to serve all Catholic students is a matter of designing an educational system that accommodates all” (p. 467). A primary element of designing such an educational system may be the role of the instructional leader. To further explore this element, the current study was designed to explore the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Catholic school principals towards serving students with disabilities within a Catholic school setting?
2. What are the professional development needs that would increase the capacity of the Catholic school to more effectively meet the needs of those with special education needs?

### **Participants**

Catholic elementary diocesan school principals were solicited to voluntarily participate in an electronic survey measuring various attitudes and perceptions about educating students with disabilities within a Catholic school context. Because the practice of special education varies from state to state,

only schools from one Midwestern state were included in the study in order to minimize any variance due to regulatory practice regarding the provision of special education programs. The researchers also recognize that this can be a limitation that will inhibit the generalizations that can be drawn from this study.

The researchers contacted 342 principals via email and 81 of these principals completed the survey (response rate 24%). However, some principals chose not to answer a few questions. A total of 54 principals answered the complete survey. Thirty-nine principals (49% of respondents) reported leading schools with fewer than 250 students, and 32 principals (40%) reported leading schools with between 251 and 500 students. Only nine principals (11%) reported leading a school with an enrollment of over 500 students. Additionally, 46 principals (58%) reported that the average class size at their schools was between 20-29 students, and 30 principals (37%) reported having a smaller average class size. Only a few principals (5%) reported an average class size of 30 and above.

Principals also reported the approximate percentage of students at their schools with special education plans. Fifty-three principals (67%) reported that less than 5% of their students had special education plans. An additional 17 principals (22%) reported that between 6-10% of their students had special education plans. Only nine principals (11%) reported that more than 10% of their students had special education plans.

Principals also provided information about their years of experience within schools (see Table 1). A majority of principals (55%) had more than 10 years of experience as full-time regular education teachers. A majority (68%) of principals had between 1-10 years as Catholic elementary school principals. Out of this sample, only 34% of the principals in this sample had served as principals in public schools.

Table 1  
Number and Percent of Principals by Various Levels of Experience

Position	Levels of Experience		
	No Experience	1-10 Years	>10 Years
Regular Education Teacher	2 (3%)	30 (42%)	40 (55%)
Catholic School Principal	0 (0%)	53 (68%)	25 (32%)
Public School Principal	36 (66%)	9 (17%)	9 (17%)



Principals also provided information on their own education and training related to special education and inclusive practices (see Table 2). Four principals in the sample reported having no special education credits or training in inclusive practices. However, principals were more likely to have 1-9 credits and 1-9 hours of training. There was a significant correlation between the number of special education credits and inclusive practices training hours principals completed ( $r=.25, p=.029$ ). That is, principals with more special education credits also tended to have more inclusive practices training.

Principals' education and training related to special education and inclusive practices was not found to be related to the percentage of students in their schools with special education plans. Specifically, no correlations were found between the percentage of students with special education plans and the principals' number of special education credits or inclusive practices training hours.

Relationships also emerged between principals' years of experience in schools and their number of special education credits. Principals with more years as Catholic school principals had *fewer* special education credits ( $r=-.34, p=.003$ ). However, principals with more years as regular education teachers had *more* special education credits ( $r=.24, p=.045$ ).

Table 2

Number and Percent of Principals by Special Education and Inclusive Practices Training

Method of Training	Credits and In-service Training Hours		
	None	1-9 Credits/ Hours	> 9 Credits/ Hours
Special Education Credits	25 (32%)	36 (45%)	18 (23%)
Inclusive Practices Hours	8 (10%)	24 (32%)	44 (56%)

### Data Collection

The principals were asked to complete an online survey measuring various attitudes and experiences related to educating students with disabilities within a Catholic school context. The survey is an adaptation the *Principals and Inclusion Survey* (PIS) (Praisner, 2000). The original survey was designed by Praisner to measure the extent to which factors such as training, experience, and program factors were related to principals' attitudes. The PIS included items from four main sections: demographics, principal training and experience, attitudes toward inclusion, and principal beliefs about most appropriate

placements. Original analysis of the reliability of the PIS was conducted by computing a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient with a split half correction factor and was reported as 0.899 (Praisner, 2000).

The PIS survey administered in the current study was adapted for a Catholic school context (see Appendix). The modified survey included abbreviated sections on demographics (Section I) and principal training and experience (Section II), as well as the full original PIS section measuring attitudes toward inclusion of students with special needs (Section III). The attitudes scale was the only scale used in data analysis, and it had high reliability in this sample of Catholic school principals, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .755$ .

The modified survey used in the current study also included two additional sections of questions that are relevant to a Catholic school context. Section IV measured principals' willingness to enroll students with a wide-range of disabilities. These variables are relevant in a Catholic school context because Catholic school principals are not required to enroll students with disabilities, whereas federal and state laws mandate that students with disabilities cannot be excluded from public schools. Section IV also included a question about the instructional services provided for students with special needs at the principals' schools. This question is relevant to a Catholic school context because these schools may not provide the full continuum of special services that are mandated in public schools. Section V assessed the topics that were included in staff development programs in the last three years. The purpose of this section was to identify the inclusion-related topics that were commonly included in Catholic school staff development programs, as well as the topics that were rarely included in programs.

**General attitudes towards inclusion.** One goal of this investigation was to gain an understanding of principals' general attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. The principals' attitudes were measured using Section III of the Principals and Inclusion Survey (PIS; Praisner, 2000). This section of the survey asked principals to rate level of agreement with statements such as "A good regular educator can do a lot to help a student with a disability" and "Only teachers with extensive special education experience can be expected to deal with students with disabilities in a school setting." Participants rated their level of agreement or disagreement with 10 statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The total score (i.e., Attitudes Score) from this section had a possible range from 10 to 50, where lower scores represented less favorable attitudes and higher scores represented more favorable attitudes.

**Disability-specific experience and willingness to enroll.** In addition to

measuring principals' attitudes towards including students with disabilities in general, the researchers used items from Section IV of the survey to investigate principals' experiences and willingness to enroll students with each disability category aligned with IDEIA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004, Part 300.8c). In this section of the survey, principals reported 1) whether they had any prior experience with children with a specified disability and 2) whether they would enroll children within each disability category at their schools. The purpose of these questions was to determine how principals' prior experiences with children with each disability might relate to their willingness to enroll other children with the same disability.

**Instructional services.** In Section IV of the survey, principals were also asked to identify the types of instructional services provided to students with disabilities enrolled in their schools. Principals indicated whether no additional services were available for students with special needs, or whether any of the following services were provided: tutoring, full-time special education in a separate classroom, part-time pull out services in special education classroom, support services in the general education classroom from a special education teacher, and supplemental services, such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy. These questions were used to determine what support services are likely to be available to students with disabilities enrolled in Catholic elementary schools.

**Staff development programs.** In Section V of the survey, principals were asked to provide information regarding the professional development opportunities provided at their schools. Starting with the list of professional development topics from Taylor (2005) and supplementing with some topics from the researchers' experiences, principals selected the issues that had been addressed during staff development programs at their schools within the last three years. The list of professional development topics can be found in Table 5.

**Qualitative data.** Four open-ended questions were embedded into Sections IV and V of the survey. These questions prompted principals to discuss their enrollment procedures, "counseling out" procedures, and perceived obstacles to including students with disabilities within the Catholic school setting.

### **Data Analysis**

Numerous quantitative analyses were conducted, including descriptive statistics, chi-square analysis, and determining correlation coefficients. Furthermore, percentages derived from raw data were reported for some responses. The researchers utilized techniques from the constant comparative method as adapted by Merriam (2009). The co-authors read the principals' responses

to the open ended questions to identify emergent categories. During this open-coding process, the researchers placed participants' responses to each question in one or more categories. The researchers discussed their findings to establish consensus. Through this process, the categories were refined and key themes were identified.

## Results

### General Attitudes Towards Inclusion

In the current study, the principals' Attitudes Scores ( $n = 74$ ) ranged from 25 to 49 with a mean of 37.1, a standard deviation of 4.7, a median of 38, and a modal score of 38. Principals who did not respond to one or more of the items on the attitudes scale were removed from this analysis. Because an Attitudes Score of 30 represents a neutral attitude, the mean score of 37.1 indicates that, on average, principals had a more positive than negative attitude towards inclusion. Most principals (90.5%) had Attitudes Scores greater than 30, and over a third of the sample had scores of 40 or above. Only four principals (5.4%) had Attitudes Scores below 30 (i.e., more negative than neutral). There was a significant correlation between principals' Attitudes Scores and the percentage of students in their schools with special education plans ( $r = .231, p = .049$ ). Principals with more positive attitudes towards inclusion reported higher percentages of students with special education plans in their schools. There was no relationship between principals' attitudes towards inclusion and their years of experience teaching or leading public or Catholic schools. Additionally, there were no relationship between principals' attitudes and the number credits/hours they completed in special education and inclusive practices.

### Disability-specific Experience and Willingness to Enroll

As indicated in Table 3, most principals (67.1% to 77.6%) reported having no prior experience with children with traumatic brain injuries, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and visual impairments/blindness. Interestingly, over half of principals (53.1% to 67.9%) reported that they would not enroll students in three of these disability groups (i.e., traumatic brain injuries, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities), and nearly half of principals (45.7%) indicated that they would not enroll students in the fourth group (i.e., visual impairments/blindness).

Conversely, few principals (1.3% to 2.5%) reported having no experience

with children with speech-language impairments, specific learning disabilities, and ADHD. When asked about their willingness to enroll students with these disabilities, only one principal reported that he or she would not enroll students with speech-language impairments, two principals reported that they would not enroll students with specific learning disabilities, and no principal reported that he or she would not enroll students with ADHD.

Table 3  
Percent of Principals by Disability Category

Disability Categories	No Prior Experience	Would Not Enroll
Traumatic brain injury	77.6	53.1
Intellectual disability	69.7	59.3
Multiple disabilities	67.1	67.9
Visual impairment/blindness	67.1	45.7
Hearing impairment/deafness	35.1	23.5
Physical disabilities	32.1	11.1
Developmental delay	19.7	17.3
Emotional and behavioral disorders	13.9	29.6
Autism	3.8	13.6
Speech-language impairment	3.8	1.2
Specific learning disability	2.5	2.5
ADHD	1.3	0

For each disability category, the researchers used chi-square analyses to test whether prior experience (yes/no) and willingness to enroll (yes/no) were significantly associated. Significant associations were found for six disability categories, including intellectual disability, visual impairment/blindness, hearing impairment/deafness, developmental delay, emotional and behavioral disorders, and autism (see Table 4). The effect sizes ( $\Phi$ ) ranged from small to large. Odds ratio analyses revealed that the odds of a principal being willing to enroll a child with intellectual disability were 3.60 times higher if the prin-

principal had experience with children with intellectual disabilities. The odds of a principal being willing to enroll a child with visual impairments/blindness were 3.39 times higher given prior experience with this group. For children with hearing impairments or deafness, the odds of a principal being willing to enroll a child were 8.36 times higher if the principal had experience with this population. The odds of a principal being willing to enroll a child with developmental delays were 10.48 times higher if the principal had experience with children with developmental delays. For children with emotional and behavioral disorders, the odds of a principal being willing to enroll a child were 5.69 times higher if the principal had experience with children within this disability category. The odds ratio was highest for children with autism; the odds of a principal being willing to enroll a child with autism were 64.87 times higher if the principal had experience with children with autism. For all other disability categories, principals' willingness to enroll was not related to whether or not they had prior experiences with children with those disabilities.

Table 4

Cross-tabulation of Prior Experience and Willingness to Enroll Students in each Disability Category

Prior Experience with Children with Disabilities	Willing to Enroll		$\chi^2$	$\Phi$
	Yes	No		
Intellectual Disabilities				
Yes	14	9	6.32*	.30
No	16	37		
Visual Impairments/Blindness				
Yes	18	7	5.61*	.27
No	22	29		
Hearing Impairments/Deafness				
Yes	45	5	14.24***	.43
No	14	13		
Developmental Delay				
Yes	55	6	15.16***	.45
No	7	8		

Table 4 (cont.)

Prior Experience with Children with Disabilities	Willing to Enroll		$\chi^2$	$\Phi$
	Yes	No		
Emotional/Behavioral Disorders				
Yes	52	16	7.38**	.31
No	4	7		
Autism				
Yes	69	7	21.52***	.52
No	0	3		

Note. \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

### Instructional Services

Principals identified the types of instructional services provided to students with disabilities enrolled in their schools. Seven principals (8.6%) reported that no additional services were available for students with special needs at their schools. Only four principals (4.9%) reported that full-time special education classrooms were available for students with special needs at their schools. Tutoring was the most common service available to students with disabilities in these Catholic schools; 63 principals (77.8%) reported that tutoring was available at their schools. Thirty principals (37.0%) reported that their schools provided support services delivered by a special education teacher in the general education classroom (37.0%).

Additionally, forty principals (49.4%) reported that their schools provided pull-out services in a special education classroom (part-time) and 59 principals (72.8%) reported that supplemented services (i.e., speech, physical, or occupational therapy) were available at their schools. These findings suggest that nearly half of the schools represented in our sample had special education teachers on staff and the majority had speech, physical, or occupational therapists providing services in their schools.

### Staff Development Programs

Nearly all principals (92.6%) indicated that differentiated instruction had been covered in staff development sessions within the last three years (see Table 5). More than half of principals (54.3% to 65.4%) reported that professional development had been provided on teaching learning strategies and alternative assessment techniques, fostering teacher collaboration, and char-

acteristics of students with disabilities. Few principals (4.9%) reported that professional development programs had included how to elicit parent and community support for inclusion and field based experiences with inclusion activities.

Table 5

Percent of Principals Reporting Staff Development Programs in the Last Three Years

Topics	Percent of Principals
Differentiated Instruction	92.6
Teaching learning strategies and alternative assessment techniques	65.4
Fostering teacher collaboration	55.6
Characteristics of students with disabilities	54.3
Academic programming for students with disabilities	46.9
Team Building	44.4
Behavior management class for working with students with disabilities	42.0
Crisis intervention	38.3
Supporting and training teachers to handle inclusion	27.2
Change process	16.0
Special education law	9.9
Life skills	7.4
Family Intervention Training	6.2
Eliciting parent and community support for inclusion	4.9
Field based experiences with actual inclusion activities	4.9

### Open Ended Responses

In addition to the PIS, principals were also asked to respond to four open-ended questions. These questions were added to investigate further dimensions in serving students with disabilities within the Catholic school setting. The researchers utilized techniques from the constant comparative method as adapted by Merriam (2009). During this open-coding process, the researchers placed participants' responses to each question in one or more categories. Through this process, the categories were refined and key themes were identified.



### **Admissions and Continued Enrollment Procedures**

Principals described their schools' enrollment procedures, as well as the procedures for removing or "counseling out" students who do not meet academic or behavioral expectations. Seventy principals described the enrollment process, and four major themes emerged from their responses: (a) meetings or interviews with parents and students, (b) review of school and medical records, evaluation reports, and IEPs, (c) academic or diagnostic testing, and (d) ensuring that the school can meet the child's needs. Meetings and interviews were the most frequently reported procedures (65.7% of principals), followed by record reviews (51.4%), and testing (37.1%). While describing their enrollment procedures, some principals (28.6%) indicated that the ultimate goal of these procedures was to determine whether the school could meet the child's unique needs.

Some principals expressed their belief that meeting or interviewing the children and parents is a crucial step in the admissions process. As one principal described, "We always interview if a child has special needs. We discuss what we can do and what we cannot do. If we feel that the child cannot be successful at our school or we do not have the staff to accommodate we do not enroll that student." Other principals expressed that a thorough review of existing records was critical in determining whether the school would be appropriate for the child. For example, one principal stated, "Social justice issue—Can and will we be able to serve this child's needs balanced with are my teachers trained to handle this in their classroom? All student data is reviewed. We ask for all medical information, IEP's, and history." These principals expressed a common belief: the enrollment of students with disabilities hinges on whether the school's resources can meet the child's needs. One principal highlighted this sentiment when he/she stated, "I would enroll any child who wanted a Catholic education if I could safely and fairly assure the right resources were available to that child."

Fifty-seven principals described the "counseling out" procedures at their schools, and two themes emerged from their responses: (a) documenting accommodations, modifications, and interventions, and (b) explaining to parents why the school cannot meet the child's needs. Some principals chose to describe the steps their schools take to avoid counseling out students (e.g., working with local public school districts), but 19.3% of principals described documenting the school's efforts to meet the child's needs, and 49.1% described explaining to parents why they were unable to meet those needs.

One principal described “counseling out” as a documentation process: “This conclusion is reached only after a year-long documentation process that looks at the support measures and the response to the support measures. If it is determined that the best interest of the student is not being served, they are then ‘counseled out’.” Several principals described the need to meticulously document all the school’s efforts (e.g., accommodations, modifications, and interventions). Other principals expressed that frequent meetings with parents are necessary, and they ultimately explain to parents that having the child remain in the school is not in the child’s best interest. As one principal stated, “Numerous parent conferences occur addressing the student’s needs and how the school is or is not meeting those needs. If it becomes apparent that the school is not meeting the needs of the student, we acknowledge that to the parent, explain why we have been unable to meet the needs and then we offer to help them find a more appropriate placement that will meet the child’s needs.”

### **Barriers and Facilitators to Inclusion**

Principals were also asked to describe the major obstacles to including students with disabilities in general education classrooms, as well as the strengths of their schools that facilitate the inclusion of these students. Fifty-five principals identified the major obstacles at their schools, and three themes emerged from their responses: (a) financial constraints, (b) teachers’ lack of experience and training in working with children with disabilities, and (c) teachers’ perceptions and attitudes regarding inclusion. Financial constraints were the most frequently reported barriers (43.6% of principals), followed by teachers’ lack of experience and training (29.1%), and teachers’ perceptions (18.2%). Principals who identified limited resources as a major obstacle to inclusion alluded to the cost of providing support staff, materials, and professional development. For example, one principal reported, “We are not equipped to handle students with severe needs at this time. We would need additional classroom space, more assistive technology, additional professional staff (counselor, social worker, resource teacher, speech therapist, occupational therapist, more tutors), and more in-service training.” These principals expressed that there was no room in their school budgets for the services that students with disabilities require. As another principal described, “We would love to serve students with special needs, but often feel that we do not have the best resources to meet their needs.” Principals who focused on the cost of service provision generally expressed that they would be willing

to include students with disabilities if the necessary resources were available.

Other principals (29.1%) reported that a major barrier to inclusion was that teachers did not have experience or training in working with children with disabilities. These principals stated that teachers lacked the necessary knowledge and preparation to meet these children's needs. One principal expressed, "Our major obstacle is that our teachers are not prepared to work with children with special needs. Ongoing education must be implemented so that the teachers can implement differentiation in the classroom." Principals who shared this view focused on a need for professional development. Many principals specifically mentioned that teachers needed training in implementing differentiated instruction in their classrooms.

A smaller percentage of principals (18.2%) identified teachers' perceptions and attitudes as a barrier to inclusion. Specifically, these principals noted that some teachers were not committed to including students with disabilities in their classrooms. For example, one principal described the challenge of "convincing some classroom teachers of the need/benefits of including diverse learners in the classroom." Principals had concerns related to the "mindset" of these teachers, and reported that in addition to a lack of commitment; teachers demonstrated a lack of flexibility and adaptability. For example, one principal stated that some teachers "do not support new teaching methods and are very unwilling to change." This principal suggested that the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms requires teachers to adopt new instructional methods, and some teachers are unwilling to make those necessary changes to their instruction.

In addition to identifying barriers, principals also identified facilitators to inclusion at their schools. Fifty-two principals identified the strengths of their schools, and two themes emerged from their responses: (a) the presence of support structures that serve students with special needs, and (b) teachers' attitudes and willingness to make accommodations and modifications. Many principals (55.8%) described the support structures that facilitated the inclusion of students with disabilities. Support structures included specific staff members, such as special education and resource teachers, reading specialists, diagnosticians, counselors, social workers, and nurses. Additionally, principals identified the school problem solving team or "Teacher Assistance Team" as facilitators to inclusion because these teams "support teachers in identifying interventions to support student learning."

The majority of principals in the sample (67.3%) identified teachers' beliefs and attitudes as a major strength. These principals stated that the teachers at

their schools were willing to include students with disabilities in their classrooms and worked to meet their needs through accommodations and modifications. One principal stated that teachers have “acceptance,” “faith,” and a “belief that all students can learn.” Another principal described, “All teachers have been open to working with students who need to have a modified plan of instruction.” The perspective of these principals stands in stark contrast to the perspective of the smaller number of principals who identified teachers’ attitudes as a major obstacle. On one hand, when principals perceived teachers as committed to including students with disabilities, these attitudes were viewed as a major facilitator to inclusion. On the other hand, when principals perceived teachers as unwilling to adapt to meet the needs of all their students, these attitudes were identified as a major barrier to inclusion.

### Discussion

The principal in a Catholic school is critical in making admission decisions for the school. This study was designed to explore Catholic school principals’ attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities, as these attitudes may impact their decision-making related to the enrollment of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. By addressing these questions, potential professional development initiatives and structural supports might be identified in order to increase the capacity of Catholic schools to program for more students with disabilities.

The study investigated two research questions, discussed in turn in the following questions. First, we consider the research question: What are the attitudes of Catholic school principals towards serving students with disabilities within a Catholic school setting? Most principals in the current study had neutral to positive attitudes towards inclusion.

Overall, the Catholic school principals’ attitudes in the current study had somewhat more positive attitudes ( $M = 37.1$ ,  $SD = 4.7$ ) towards inclusion than the public school principals in the Prasiner (2003) study, as principals in that study had a mean score of 34.8 and a standard deviation of 7.0. This discrepancy in findings would suggest that there might be a greater predisposition toward inclusive practice among Catholic school principals, which is consistent with the themes of Catholic Social Teaching.

An interesting finding emerged when looking at the relationship between principals’ previous experiences with students with disabilities and the principals’ willingness to enroll students with disabilities. For the High Incidence disability categories, such as learning disability, ADHD, speech and language

impairment (Salend, 2005), principals' reported willingness to enroll students in these disability categories was not related to whether or not they had prior experiences with children with those disabilities. Although not probed in this survey, it would be interesting to determine why this perception exists. It could be related to the higher prevalence rates that these disabilities occur in the general population and that systems of support that have already been developed to address need. If this is the case, students who fall into these disability categories may pose less of a concern as their needs may be more easily met within a given Catholic school.

For six disability categories, a significant association emerged between principals' willingness to enroll these students and whether or not they had prior experiences with children with those disabilities. Of these six disability categories, five of them are Low Incidence disabilities: intellectual disability, visual impairment/blindness, hearing impairment/deafness, developmental delay, and autism (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1400, Sec.662(c) (3), 2004). Admittedly, these areas may require additional services to address the educational needs present with each disability category and could be perceived as financially taxing the Catholic school. However, it is interesting to note that, where principals have had positive experiences with that disability category, there is a willingness to include these students within the Catholic school setting, even though including students in these categories may require additional resources. Although not part of the scope of this study, it would be interesting to probe the reasons for this. The question becomes is there a pre-conception about educational need when the principal has no experience with the disability category? This finding certainly requires further investigation. This could suggest that if principals have positive experiences with a broad spectrum of disabilities that they may be more willing to consider enrolling these students within the Catholic school.

The final research question considered in this study sought to identify the professional development needs in Catholic schools to increase the capacity of meeting the needs of those with special education. Several issues were identified. First, financial constraints were one the major barriers to inclusionary practice identified by principals in this study. These principals (44%) often responded that they would be willing to include more students with disabilities if the necessary budgetary appropriations were present. This brings about an interesting question. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops remind church based programs that "...costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with

disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty. (NCCB, 1998, p.1)". However, the reality of rising Catholic school tuition and decreased access to federal flow-through dollars through special education programming present a dilemma to the Catholic school administrator.

It is interesting to note that, although schools have provided professional development time to differentiated instruction and teaching learning strategies and alternative assessment techniques, there is still concern about teacher perception about inclusive practices within Catholic school settings. In this sample, only about half of the principals reported conducting professional development with explicit topics related to inclusionary practices in Catholic school settings. Professional development on such topics as characteristics of students with disabilities and academic programming for students with disabilities may need to be conducted in an explicit and systematic fashion in order to provide on-going supports for teachers in this area. Additionally, skill building sessions in inclusionary practices may need to be provided to staff, given the low levels of professional development opportunities reported by respondent principals.

Another area of teacher support appears to be in the area of collaboration. In order to effectively program for students with disabilities, teachers need to collaborate around effective teaching practices. Yet, only 55.6% of the principal respondents reported professional development in fostering teacher collaboration and 44.4% of the principal respondents reported professional development in team building. Quality inclusionary programs tend to be predicated on highly collaborative relationships and supportive problem-solving teams. Without explicit professional development in this area, it would be difficult to expect inclusionary approaches to take root.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations in this study that may impact generalizing the results to other contexts. First, although respectable, the sample size ( $n=81$ , 24% response rate) could be more robust. It is quite possible that the electronic format of the survey may have inadvertently lowered the response rate as some principals may have not had either access or time in order to complete the survey.

Another limitation could lie in the format of the qualitative responses. Given the electronic format of the survey, respondents may have felt limited in the manner that they answered questions. The use of interviews could give a wider range of responses to the qualitative portion of this study. An inter-

view format may have elicited richer responses and allowed the researcher to probe many of these areas for additional clarification and edification.

### **Recommendations for Research and Practice**

As suggested earlier in the literature review, systematic approaches to the study of inclusive practice in Catholic schools are limited. Generally, there is need for more investigation in this area. It seems critical to identify the practices and supports that can lead to effective inclusionary practice within Catholic schools settings.

A question raised by this study was if principals have positive experiences with a broad spectrum of disabilities would they be more willing to consider enrolling these students within the Catholic school? This study has identified some strong relationships in this area. This raises the possibility of specific professional development in the form of directed externships for Catholic school administrators. The possibility arises of developing collaborative relationships with social service agencies that serve students with disabilities to develop these externships. Principals could gain valuable experiences interacting with students and families in therapy settings, recreational situations and family support groups to gain insight into the educational and affective needs of these students. If Catholic school principals are afforded the opportunity to interact with individuals with disabilities and their families through these externships, could these experiences positively increase more opportunities for enrollment of such individuals within a Catholic school setting?

Financial concerns are often mentioned when discussing inclusion in Catholic schools. Innovations in service delivery that are cost effective need to be identified. Systematic approaches to programming such as Response to Intervention (now often referred to as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) may hold promise as methods to address the needs of a wider spectrum of student need (Boyle, 2010, p.6). Further, exploration of Catholic schools that have successfully addressed the funding conundrum may articulate a set of strategies that other Catholic schools may utilize to confront this concern. Fostering active involvement from external sources may also help Catholic schools to identify and develop methods to approach programming.

Professional development of faculty and staff is another critical feature identified in this study. A connection could exist between level of teachers' preparation to instruct students with disabilities and the willingness to do so.

Although not a specific focus of this study, general education teachers who do not possess the skills and strategies to work with students with disabilities may lack the confidence to undertake such a task. This points to an area of further research. Additional professional development in explicitly connecting inclusive approaches to education and Catholic Social Teaching could also enhance professional practice around this area.

As suggested earlier in this investigation, there are several obstacles that inhibit the adoption of more inclusive approaches to educating those with disabilities within Catholic schools. However, this should serve as a challenge to Catholic schools to become more creative and resolute in developing inclusive approaches. As Blessed Paul VI states: “The Church invites all Christians to take up a double task of inspiring and innovating in order to make structures evolve so as to adapt them to the real needs of today” (Octogesima Adveniens (1971), no. 48).

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**Appendix**  
**Principals and Inclusion Survey**  
**(Adapted from Praisner, 2000)**

**Section I**  
**Demographic Information**

The following information will be only be used to describe the population being studied.

1. Approximate number of all students in your building:

- 0-250       251-500       501-750       751-1000       1000 or more

2. Average class size for all students:

- 0-9       10-19       20-29       30-39       40 or more

3. Percent of students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) or Individual Service Plans (ISP):

- 0-5%       6-10%       11-15%       16-20%       21% or more

**Section II**  
**Training and Experience**

1. Years of full-time regular education teaching experience:

- 0       1-5       6-10       11-15       15-20       21 or more

2. Years as a Catholic elementary school principal:

- 0       1-5       6-10       11-15       15-20       21 or more

3. Years as a public elementary school principal:

- 0       1-5       6-10       11-15       15-20       21 or more

4. Approximate number of special education credits in your formal training:

- 0       1-9       10-15       16-21       22 or more

5. Approximate number of in-service training hours in inclusive practices:

- 0       1-9       10-15       16-21       22 or more



**Section III****Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs**

Please mark your response to each item using the following scale:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Only teachers with extensive special education experience can be expected to deal with students with disabilities in a school setting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Classrooms with both students with disabilities and without disabilities enhance the learning experiences of students with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Students with severe/profound disabilities are too impaired to benefit from the activities of a regular school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. An effective general educator can help a student with a disability to succeed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. In general, students with disabilities should be placed in special classes/schools specifically designed for them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Students without disabilities can profit from contact with students with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. General education should be modified to meet the needs of all students including students with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. It is unfair to ask/expect general education teachers to accept students with disabilities into their classrooms.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. No discretionary financial resources should be allocated for the integration of students with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. It should be policy and/or law that students with disabilities are integrated into general educational programs and activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Section IV**  
**Student and Service Demographics**

1. Which categories of students with special needs (either identified through a psychological assessment or not identified but suspected) has your school enrolled? (Select all that apply.)

Disability Type	Previously Enrolled	Currently Enrolled	Would Enroll	Would Not Enroll
Autism Spectrum Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developmental Delay	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotional/Behavioral Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hearing impairment/Deafness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intellectual Disability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Multiple/ severe disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical impairment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specific learning disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speech–language impairments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Traumatic brain injury	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visual impairment/ blindness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. What are your enrollment procedures? Are testing or interviews needed? What modifications (such as alternative tests) are allowed for any of these procedures?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What instructional services are provided for students with special needs? (Select all that apply.)

- No additional services other than the general education classroom
- Tutoring
- Separate special education classroom, full time
- Pull out services in a special education classroom, part time
- Support services in the general education classroom from a special education teacher
- Supplemental services, such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy

4. What are your procedures for “counseling out” students who are not achieving, academically or behaviorally, to the expected guidelines of your school?

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### **Section V** **Staff Development Programs**

1. Please indicate the topics that were included in staff development programs for your staff in the last three years. (Select all that apply.)

- Characteristics of students with disabilities
- Behavior management class for working with students with disabilities
- Academic programming for students with disabilities
- Special education law
- Crisis intervention
- Life skills training for students with disabilities
- Teambuilding
- Differentiated Instruction
- Family intervention training
- Supporting and training teachers to handle inclusion
- Change process
- Eliciting parent and community support for inclusion
- Fostering teacher collaboration
- Field based experiences with actual inclusion activities
- Teaching learning strategies (study skills, organizational skill etc) Alternative assessment techniques

2. What do you view as the strengths (currently in place) of your school that could facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs in general education classrooms at your school?

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3. Please indicate the readiness level of your staff to effectively instruct students with disabilities within your school.

	Not Ready	Some Readiness	Ready	Do not have a class at that grade level
Early Childhood (Prek-K and K)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Primary (Grades 1-3)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intermediate (Grades 4-6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Junior High (Grades 7-8)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. What do you view as major obstacles to including students with special needs in general education classrooms at your school?

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