JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH & PRACTICE

Journal of Educational Research & Practice
2025, Volume 15, Pages 1–14
DOI: 10.5590/JERAP.2025.15.2165
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Original Research

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

Tensions and Transformations: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in a Diverse Urban School Division

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Abstract

This study examines how equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are understood and implemented within a large, diverse, urban school division in Canada. Using a mixed-methods approach and grounded in theoretical perspectives, including critical race theory, intersectionality, the ecology of inclusive education, and collective efficacy theory, we gathered insights from surveys and focus groups with educators, administrators, clinicians, educational assistants, caregivers, and students. Findings suggest that, while support for EDI is broad, the implementation is inconsistent and shaped by systemic barriers, resource constraints, and unclear leadership. We highlight the need for shared language, coordinated supports, and ongoing professional learning and instructional redesign. We offer a model for examining EDI at a systems level and share lessons to guide sustained transformation in other school organizations.

Keywords: *equity, inclusion, education, systems, diversity*

Date Submitted: July 21, 2025 | **Date Published**: November 14, 2025

Recommended Citation

Eblie Trudel, L. E., Anderson Leachman, K., & Davies, W. (2025). Tensions and transformations: Equity, diversity, and inclusion in a diverse urban school division. *Journal of Educational Research & Practice, 15*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2025.15.2165

Note: This study was funded by the University of Winnipeg through a Major Research Grant. The support provided by this grant is gratefully acknowledged.

Introduction

Education systems and policy makers around the world have long prioritized the goal of offering inclusive,

enduring, and high-quality learning opportunities that meet the needs of a diverse range of students (Medina-Garcia et al., 2020). In Canada, one in four individuals is foreign born (Statistics Canada, 2021), a fact that is central to national policy on multiculturalism. In light of this, provincial and territorial governments position themselves not only for student achievement, but also for advancing inclusive and equitable systems (Campbell, 2021). Although the federal government is responsible for First Nations education, 30% of Indigenous children attend provincially funded schools (Assembly of First Nations, 2016). Accordingly, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are taking a more prominent role in Canadian public education, with growing efforts to create spaces where all students feel that they belong and have a voice (Parekh, 2018). Eden and colleagues (2024) argued that as school systems across the country increasingly commit to EDI principles, a central challenge emerges regarding how to ensure that these commitments move beyond policy rhetoric and permeate practice, professional learning, community engagement, and organizational culture. Hart (2018) similarly advocated, "Education policy must go hand in hand with practice developments" (p. 594). Additionally, Fullan (2016) emphasized that in complex educational systems, EDI should not be reduced to a checklist of initiatives or programs. Instead, it is better understood as a dynamic, system-wide orientation that requires courage, critical reflection, and coherence. It is within this spirit that our research team embarked on this study.

The school division featured in the study is large, diverse, complex, and dynamic. According to the Annual Report to the Community (Winnipeg School Division, 2023), the division serves nearly 30,000 students across 79 schools, reflecting a broad range of racial, linguistic, and cultural identities. Schools in the division support over 100 spoken languages and offer programming in multiple Indigenous and heritage languages, while serving communities that span a wide range of socioeconomic contexts. In fourteen elementary and nine secondary schools, more than 50% of students self-identify as Indigenous, and approximately 8.5% of students live in homes where no English is spoken. Given the school division's size, demographics, and clear commitment toward reconciliation and inclusion, it provides a meaningful context for examining how EDI takes shape in Canadian school systems.

Literature Review

With school divisions in Canada increasingly committing to equity, diversity, and inclusion, the challenge lies not only in articulating what EDI means, but also in embedding it meaningfully within the everyday operations of schools and systems. This requires moving beyond surface-level initiatives toward sustained efforts that address fairness, representation, and belonging across educational contexts (Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2018; Thomas, 2019). In general, Canada's EDI commitment aligns with international goals for inclusive education, such as those articulated in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4) and in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Global Education Monitoring Report (2020). When enacted in education, inclusive practices can lead to improved academic outcomes and support for students' social-emotional well-being, especially for those who have been historically marginalized (UNESCO, 2014, 2017). Nonetheless, even well-intentioned efforts can run into deep-rooted beliefs and routines that unintentionally keep inequities in place. Doing this work well means being willing to look closely at how school systems operate, question who holds power, and welcome a wide range of voices and experiences (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018). It also requires a long-term orientation that views EDI not as a set of isolated initiatives but as a foundational lens for system transformation and educational improvement (Moreu et al., 2021). Within this context, school systems are increasingly navigating evolving priorities, competing demands, and the complexity of necessary organizational change.

To engage meaningfully with the tensions and transformations emerging from equity work in complex structures, this study draws on four interrelated theoretical frameworks. Together, these frameworks help ensure that our analysis not only mirrors lived experiences, but also provides windows into different

perspectives and sliding glass doors that invite entry into new ways of seeing (Bishop, 1990). Each theory offers a distinct yet complementary lens through which to understand systemic inequities, diverse experiences, and the conditions for inclusive change. Together, they help interpret how EDI lives and sometimes struggles in the context of large and complex systems.

Critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1992) provides the foundation for understanding how systemic racism and structural inequality are embedded in educational institutions, policies, and practices. Rather than treating racism as the result of individual prejudice, CRT highlights how it is normalized and reproduced through institutional mechanisms. Looking at this particular school division, CRT helps illuminate how differences in student achievement, access to resources, disciplinary actions, and leadership representation can point to deeper, systemic patterns of racial and cultural marginalization. Drawing on the education-focused work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, 2016), this study uses CRT not only to name inequities, but to center the experiences and knowledge of those most affected by them—particularly Indigenous, racialized, and newcomer communities within the school division.

Building on this foundation, intersectionality, originally theorized by Crenshaw (1989), helps explain how overlapping aspects of identity, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and language, shape people's experiences in varied and often compounding ways. In the diverse school division in this study, intersectionality offers insight into why inclusion does not look or feel the same for everyone. It helps to unpack why some students, families, and staff may face greater barriers than others. Rather than treating equity as a matter of single categories, intersectionality calls for a more responsive approach that considers the full complexity of people's lives. Within this study, intersectionality is used to interpret the diverse responses among stakeholder groups and to bring to the surface how those layered identities shape the possibilities and limits of inclusion in day-to-day practice.

In turn, the ecology of inclusive education (Anderson et al., 2014), an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977), provides a systems-level framework that positions the learner in the middle of concentric layers of influence, from the classroom and school to broader social, cultural, and policy contexts. This framework integrates three core outcomes of inclusive education: participation, achievement, and belonging. It helps map how interactions between microsystems (student-teacher relationships), mesosystems (school-family partnerships), exosystems (school division policies), and macrosystems (colonial legacies and systemic racism) impact learners' experiences. Within this study, the ecology of inclusive education framework was key to interpreting the ways that structural conditions and relational dynamics intersected, either to support or to hinder inclusion.

Additionally, collective efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997, 2000; Goddard et al., 2004) focuses on the shared belief among educators and staff in their collective power to make a difference in student outcomes. In the context of equity and inclusion, collective efficacy becomes especially relevant: It reveals not only whether educators believe change is possible, but whether they see themselves as agents of that change. Katz and Dack (2013) emphasize that collective efficacy develops through professional inquiry and observable progress toward improvement goals. Similarly, Donohoo (2017) identifies collective efficacy as the most significant factor influencing student achievement, particularly when nurtured through collaborative learning, evidence of impact, and shared goal-setting. This framework helps explain some of the differences observed in the school division of study, particularly in relation to staff perceptions of capacity, responsibility, and support. A strong sense of collective efficacy has been shown to assist with collaboration, innovation, and resilience, qualities essential for navigating the complexity and discomfort that often accompany system-wide EDI work.

Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical scaffolding for this study. They informed the development of research methods, guided the interpretation of data, and framed the findings as contributions to objectives for social justice and systemic transformation.

Research Questions

Building on this foundation, we were guided by three key questions:

1. How do people in different roles across the school division experience EDI?
2. Where is EDI meaningfully embedded, and where does it fall short?
3. What kinds of system-level tensions and transformations are emerging?

Methods

Context

To better understand how EDI commitments are lived within the everyday realities of a complex school system, this study engaged a mixed-methods design, grounded in both theory and practice. Rather than assessing compliance or policy alignment, our goal was to explore how inclusive values, practices, and commitments are lived across the division. The research team sought to understand where EDI lives in the system: specifically, where it aligns, where it diverges, where it is falling short, and where points of tension are emerging. The goal was to identify both the strengths and the stretches in the school division's approaches, recognizing that tensions are not necessarily indicators of failure, but are often indicators of growth.

Using the combination of mixed methods, including an adapted survey and multiple focus groups, this research captured the lived experiences of educators, parents, clinicians, and leaders working across the school division. Their perspectives and stories offered a glimpse into the broader systems at play, as well as the day-to-day dynamics that shape inclusive education. The survey data offered a snapshot of inclusion-related perceptions across multiple roles, while focus groups allowed for an exploration of the nuances, challenges, and possibilities emerging from the lived experiences of participants. This research received approval from the university's research ethics board and followed all required protocols for informed consent, confidentiality, and data storage.

Instrumentation

The survey used in this study was adapted from *Indicators of Inclusive Schools: Continuing the Conversation* (Alberta Education, 2013), an instrument modelled after the *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools* (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). It is based on a validated framework aligned with five dimensions of inclusive education: inclusive values and principles, inclusive learning environments, providing supports for success, organizing learning and instruction, and engaging with the community. The framework began with an emphasis on shared commitments to equity, diversity, and student well-being and then a focus on the sense of belonging created from welcoming and respectful spaces. Following that, the survey continued with an examination of the supports provided for student success and then branched off to an exploration of instructional practices that reflected student strengths, needs, and interests. The final section involved a reflection on community engagement in supporting student learning and inclusion. Results of the survey represented combined responses from parents, teachers, educational assistants, clinicians or student services personnel, and school leaders.

Data Collection

A modified version of the survey was administered online through the Qualtrics platform between April and July 2024. It included 60 Likert-scale items across five thematic sections, presented in a fixed order to help ensure that participants completed the full survey consistently. Of the 35 responses collected, six were excluded

due to early termination, leaving a total of 29 valid cases for analysis. We imported data into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28), screened for anomalies, and checked for duplicate entries, none of which were found. Missing data were not imputed to preserve natural variation. While the sample size was modest, it included voices from a range of professional relationships with the school division. This allowed for analysis across multiple data sources to enhance the depth and consistency of perspectives and identification of key divergences. Descriptive statistics were reported for each item and organized by dimension. The survey responses were grouped according to the framework's five dimensions, which helped structure how we interpreted patterns across each theme. We summarized descriptive statistics for each dimension, and the results were presented in a format that facilitated both clarity and alignment with the study's conceptual model.

To deepen and contextualize the survey findings, focus groups were held with key stakeholders to gather in-depth insights into how EDI is understood and enacted across roles in the school division. Focus groups offered a structured yet conversational space for participants to share their perspectives in a guided setting (Collins & O'Brian, 2003). They were particularly valuable in capturing collective perspectives, drawing on the interactions between participants, to bring to the surface both individual views and group-level meaning-making (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The method was selected for its capacity to create open dialogue in a safe environment, while enabling participants to reflect critically on systemic dynamics and contextual realities of the school division.

Participants

Focus group participants were purposefully selected to reflect the diversity of roles and experiences within the Winnipeg School Division (2023). A total of 23 individuals participated in six, 1-hour, role-specific groups, with one group held for each of the following: six teachers, four school administrators, three educational assistants, two clinicians, six parents/caregivers, and two high school students. The division itself serves a highly diverse population, encompassing communities from affluent suburban neighborhoods to those experiencing significant socioeconomic challenges in the inner city. Staff were recruited through a division-wide email invitation outlining the study's purpose and procedures. Parents/caregivers were invited through a community parent advisory committee, while students were engaged through a separate assent process, with parental consent obtained in accordance with division protocols. Focus groups were conducted between April 29 and July 26, 2024, and scheduled for approximately 1 hour each. In cases where a participant could not attend a group session, an individual interview was offered as an alternative.

Data Analysis

Each focus group was led by a member of the research team using a semi-structured guide composed of questions that were grounded in the same five inclusive education dimensions as the survey. With the support of the guide, the researchers prompted participants to reflect on current practices, identify successes and gaps, and articulate aspirations for systemic change. All sessions were recorded and then transcribed by a research assistant. Initial coding was completed by research team members assigned to specific groups, using an inductive approach based on the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The transcripts were then analyzed thematically across all groups to identify commonalities, divergences, and key themes reflective of the systemic and relational dimensions of EDI in the school division (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

Results

To better understand role-based perceptions of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within the school division of study, descriptive findings were structured around the five key survey dimensions: Dimension 1, Establishing Inclusive Values and Principles; Dimension 2, Building Inclusive Learning Environments;

Dimension 3, Providing Supports for Success; Dimension 4, Organizing Learning and Instruction; and Dimension 5, Engaging with the Community. Before analyzing the responses in depth, however, we first assessed internal consistency across the five areas. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated, aligning with the original data approach (no imputation). As shown in Table 1, four of the five dimensions on the survey demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency (α = 0.692–0.798), supporting the coherence of each scale. Due to missing responses across several items, internal consistency for Dimension 5 could not be assessed using this method. The adapted survey in this study included 59 items in total, with each dimension ranging from 10 to 14 items. Overall, the survey findings suggest that most items were consistently aligned with the constructs they were intended to measure.

Table 1. *Internal Consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) by Dimension*

Subscale	Items	Cronbach's α
Dimension 1	12	0.788
Dimension 2	12	0.798
Dimension 3	14	0.719
Dimension 4	11	0.692
Dimension 5	10	—

Descriptive statistics for each dimension, summarized in Table 2, offer insight into how participants across different roles perceived inclusion-related practices. This includes both the level of agreement and variation in responses. Participant ratings were based on a 5-point scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. In general, mean scores above 3.5 reflect broad agreement, while values below 3 point to uncertainty or differing views. Taken together, these findings offer a snapshot of both the perceived effectiveness and inconsistencies of inclusion-related practices across the system.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics by Dimension*

Subscale	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*
Dimension 1	3.52	4.45	4.06	0.58
Dimension 2	2.93	4.14	3.68	0.69
Dimension 3	2.76	4.24	3.68	0.74
Dimension 4	2.59	4.04	3.34	0.77
Dimension 5	2.81	4.37	3.65	0.68

In Dimension 1 (Establishing Inclusive Values and Principles), participants reflected on the foundational values that guide equity and inclusion across the division. This dimension showed the highest overall agreement across the survey (Mean = 4.06) and the lowest variability (*SD* = 0.58), suggesting strong consensus. Most participants believe that inclusive values are embedded in decision-making, diversity is respected, and student well-being is central to practice. The narrow range of item means (Min = 3.52, Max = 4.45) and low standard deviation indicate that participants shared a consistent view, regardless of their role. While there were minor differences (views on respect for human rights), the coherence in responses suggests this dimension can serve as evidence of a strong foundation for further equity-focused initiatives.

For Dimension 2 (Building Inclusive Learning Environments), participants showed moderate agreement

(Mean = 3.68) that school environments are welcoming and inclusive. However, the slightly higher standard deviation (0.69) and range of responses (Min = 2.93, Max = 4.14) suggest that the experience of inclusivity varied across groups. For example, parents/caregivers expressed more doubt about whether students were truly included in classroom communities, while educators tended to view the environments more positively. These discrepancies revealed the importance of listening to multiple perspectives when assessing school climate. Specific concerns were raised around physical accessibility and how well student identities were visibly represented, both of which were seen as areas needing more attention. Even though there was a clear commitment to inclusion, there seemed to be a gap between what was intended and what was actually experienced.

Dimension 3 (Providing Supports for Success) also had a mean of 3.68, but a slightly higher *SD* (0.74), reflecting greater disparity in perceptions of support availability. The item range (Min = 2.76, Max = 4.24) highlights this variability. While participants widely supported responses such as differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technologies, other areas (such as specialist access, support for diverse student needs, and overreliance on educational assistants) revealed tensions. These results showed a clear commitment to equity-based support, but also pointed to real challenges, such as limited resources that schools face. Some participants felt neutral or even disagreed, noting that resources and supports were not always implemented consistently. This highlights the need for designated funding and improved coordination to make sure support is both fair and accessible.

In Dimension 4 (Organizing Learning and Instruction), participants demonstrated the lowest average agreement (Mean = 3.34) and the highest variability (*SD* = 0.77), with the most significant divergence in views. The item range (Min = 2.59, Max = 4.04) indicates both promising and challenging areas. While some respondents affirmed that students have access to multiple learning strategies and opportunities for collaboration through cooperative learning and peer interaction, others raised concerns about rigid school and classroom schedules, traditional assessment practices, and one-size-fits-all instruction. The data suggest that inclusive pedagogy is not yet systemically embedded and that classroom experiences vary depending on the school or context. This dimension represents a strategic priority area for professional learning and instructional redesign.

Finally, Dimension 5 (Engaging with the Community) presented a balanced profile (Mean = 3.65, SD = 0.68), with many participants agreeing that school communities generally value family involvement and share information effectively. The item range (Min = 2.81, Max = 4.37) suggests more agreement around communication than about reciprocal engagement. For instance, while families are informed, fewer respondents felt they had meaningful input into decision-making or that community resources were being fully mobilized. The data also suggest that perceptions of engagement may depend on role. Overall, this dimension highlights not only a solid foundation for partnership but also the opportunity to build stronger bridges between schools, families, and communities through codesigned approaches.

While the survey findings offered a broad snapshot of participant perceptions across five key dimensions of EDI, they captured only one layer of the division's overall context. To build a deeper understanding of how EDI commitments are interpreted and experienced in practice, we conducted a series of focus groups with six key stakeholder groups: school administrators, clinicians, educational assistants (EAs), teachers, parents/caregivers, and students. These discussions offered rich, role-specific insights into both the strengths and the systemic tensions shaping EDI implementation. The following paragraphs provide a concise summary of themes emerging from each focus group

The administrator focus group expressed both optimism and caution in relation to EDI progress within the school division. Participants noted that conversations about equity were becoming more frequent and widespread, which they saw as an encouraging sign of progress. As one administrator remarked, "The mere

fact that these discussions are happening is seen as a positive development and suggests a willingness to address and confront complex issues." Administrators also emphasized the absence of a shared language, concerns about performative practices, and limited accountability structures for school leaders. One participant averred, "People think they're talking about something or doing something and moving in a certain direction. And then you talk to somebody else and they perceive it differently. It's very difficult to see a common language and understanding." The group emphasized the need for deeper engagement and education to address intersectionality, colonialism, and systemic inequities. One administrator noted, "We have not even had the conversation to educate folks on why representation is important and how it goes beyond tokenism. We have a lot more to talk about because the lack of education comes across as performative." Moreover, administrators recommended that EDI conversations should be facilitated by individuals external to existing power structures to ensure greater impact and authenticity, with one participant saying, "I think having an outside group facilitate conversations of this nature would support making it feel like it's leading to something actionable."

Clinicians provided a systems-level view of evolving practices in assessment, intervention, and inclusion. One participant commented, "I've seen a big shift in clinical practice towards classroom-based intervention. We've done a lot of changing in our thinking around the multi-tiered systems of supports and where can we work in different areas to maximize our impact." Clinicians highlighted progress in areas such as structured literacy, culturally responsive programming, and the integration of Indigenous perspectives. Another participant remarked, "Some of the schools have specific designated spaces where they have elders. It is far more present in our schools now than it used to be, so that is to be celebrated." Nonetheless, clinicians also identified significant challenges. These included inadequate staffing, logistical barriers, and a lack of consistent professional learning and development. Concerns were raised about the elimination of specialized supports and the growing pressure on the clinician team to meet complex needs without sufficient time, space, or resources. A participant noted, "One of the first questions many clinicians have is, who can work with students? Teachers are coming to us with this concern. The reality is that clinicians cannot be in every school every day."

Educational assistants described inclusive practices as promising, yet precarious. They emphasized that scaffolding strategies and team-based collaboration were effective supports for students, particularly in elementary contexts. One participant stated, "Collaboration between educational assistants, social workers, psychologists, classroom teachers and anyone who is involved, especially for students that may have some behavior or academic concerns, I think that is working quite well." Participants, however, noted significant inequities in the allocation of EAs across schools, a reduction in designated programming for specific students, and insufficient supports for students. One EA observed, "We need to step up for our younger LGBTQIA+ students, so they have the support they need." EAs advocated for a more cohesive system-wide approach, increased consultation during planning processes, and the reinstatement of supports that had proven effective for neurodiverse learners. One participant pointed out, "There were some current practices that were really strong that have been discontinued this year and should be revived in some way, shape or form."

The parent and caregiver group members offered valuable insights into the ways inclusion is experienced within families and communities. Participants spoke positively about supports in place for students with visible or complex needs but also expressed concerns about inconsistent approaches for students with invisible disabilities, such as autism and ADHD. One participant said, "For students who are clearly identifiable as having complex needs, that is something done very well. There are typically clinicians readily available and the school does a good job with intake, and getting those supports in place quickly." Parents and caregivers emphasized the need for sustained professional learning to support students with all needs and advocated for authentic engagement with EDI work, beyond performative gestures. One participant claimed, "The division has made strides in promoting PRIDE and other EDI initiatives, making them more visible than in the past, but these observances don't always translate into policy changes or ongoing practices." Several participants in this group also questioned the distribution of EDI resources within the division, with one

noting, "Seeing how pertinent this needs to be in every aspect of the organization, the current distribution reflects a questionable commitment to the work." Lastly, parents and caregivers called for more inclusive decision-making processes to center community voices. One member of the group suggested, "If you want to listen to the community's voice, if you want to make them feel that they are part of the school (beyond fundraising and football), there should be regular events where you are welcomed to come in."

Students shared both affirming and challenging experiences related to EDI within their schools. They praised programs that supported cultural adjustment and newcomer leadership but also reported persistent issues related to racism, cultural insensitivity, and limited staff diversity. One student stated, "I don't think the school recognizes other people's cultures or where they come from and they just stick to the majority." Student participants described feeling excluded by school practices that were ineffective in acknowledging their lived experiences and noted barriers faced by non-English-speaking parents. One participant asserted, "Coaches do not understand the lives we live—especially going home late. In my culture, this does not work well. They should support students and their parents and not leave students to work this out on their own." Recommendations from students included greater curriculum representation, increased staff training in cultural responsiveness, and the creation of more inclusive spaces for dialogue and engagement. Students offered a proactive strategy going forward, with one remarking, "We need a parent council for African parents. Some parents fear coming to school because they cannot speak English well and sometimes may not be able to understand when Canadian teachers are speaking, so they are discouraged."

Teachers reflected on both the structural advancements and implementation challenges related to EDI. They pointed to the establishment of essential cultural supports for Indigenous students and the facilitated opportunities for students to engage with their traditions. One teacher commented, "We have the space in our building and we have students who are connecting to it. It has given us opportunities to engage with kids in different ways." Another participant also elaborated, "Some schools have created movement and sensory spaces that respond to students' needs–environments that support student well-being and learning." While teachers acknowledged progress, particularly in relation to Indigenous supports and inclusive classroom design, they raised concerns about inequitable resource allocation, outdated instructional strategies, and insufficient preparation for culturally responsive practices. One teacher contended, "Our strategies and expectations of what we're teaching need to be updated. We require a different focus on what we're providing for our students when they're in our schools." Teachers emphasized the need for systemic changes in instructional practice, as well as the allocation of supports and resources. They advocated for a more realistic timeline for EDI implementation, recognizing the complexities and demands of the work within the current educational landscape. As one participant noted, "You just can't turn a ship on a dime. We need to give people time and space for learning these things and asking everyone to change things that fast. It's not fair to anybody."

Having explored the qualitative perspectives in detail, below we analyze these findings with the survey data to examine overarching themes that characterize EDI across the school division. Across both survey and focus group data, we identified five themes that shape the current context of EDI in the school division and lend themselves to potential next steps:

1. While inclusive values were widely affirmed, according to each participant group, the findings revealed inconsistent implementation and varied interpretations of EDI principles across role groups. There was an apparent need to rebuild and refocus shared values and common language across the division.

2. Despite pockets of success, participants highlighted persistent inequities in access to supports and resources, especially for students with diverse learning needs. While policy intentions around inclusion appeared evident, the application of equitable and inclusive practices remained inconsistent across schools.

3. Data revealed tensions between welcoming school cultures and structural barriers, including limited cultural representation, physical inaccessibility, and perceptions of performative practice. Creating inclusive environments depends not only on superficial approaches but on tangible changes.

4. Staff expressed a strong commitment to inclusion but also described feeling stretched and under-supported, pointing to a mismatch between educator dedication and the systemic resources required to sustain authentic, inclusive practices. The data revealed the need for greater resourcing of EDI efforts in response to workload demands, providing professional development, creating learning communities, and reallocating existing collaboration time to enhance equity work.

5. Finally, gaps in leadership accountability emerged across the data, with participants raising concerns about the absence of clear benchmarks, role-specific expectations, and mechanisms for evaluating EDI implementation. Together, these elements indicated critical areas where systemic change is needed to realize EDI more consistently.

Taken together, these system implications reflect an opportunity to bridge the gap between values and action. The data show that intent for inclusion in the school division is strong, but that structures and practices are not yet fully aligned. Acknowledging these tensions and considering potential responses creates a space where transformation becomes possible.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate the complex nature of EDI in a large, diverse, urban school division. They reveal a school system in progress, and the work of EDI exists in the tensions between knowing and doing. It is within this space that transformation becomes possible. Considering these findings through the study's four theoretical lenses helps make sense of the complex realities facing the school division.

Integration With Current Literature

From a CRT perspective, longstanding issues of unequal access and unclear accountability mechanisms highlight how structural inequities continue to shape educational experiences. The differences in perception between role groups reflect how dominant perspectives can obscure or minimize the experiences of marginalized groups. CRT calls for critical attention to school division policies, funding formulas, and leadership practices to uncover where power is focused and to determine whose voices are prioritized in decision-making. Without this analysis, efforts to promote inclusion may reinforce rather than disrupt existing inequities.

Intersectionality theory provides a further reminder of how disparities are experienced depending on one's positionality within the system. The focus group data revealed that families who spoke languages other than English, students with disabilities, racialized staff, and individuals in various roles both perceived and experienced inclusion differently. For instance, a newcomer EA supporting a student with refugee status may hold multiple identities that shape their capacity to advocate or be heard regarding inclusive programming. In this situation, intersectionality theory cautions against generalizing the idea of inclusion and instead encourages attention to the multiple, overlapping identities that affect access, representation, and belonging.

The ecology of inclusive education framework helps explain how these tensions surface across different levels of the system. Rather than being the sole responsibility of classroom teachers or school administrators, inclusion is shaped by a web of interactions between policies, relationships, resources, and cultural norms. The study findings revealed that many educators felt individually responsible for ensuring that inclusive practice would occur, but lacked the systemic supports to do so. At the same time, families found that even

when individual teachers were welcoming, the larger system remained a challenge. The ecology of inclusive education framework reinforces the importance of a coordinated, system-wide approach that links micro-level relationships to macro-level structures.

Collective efficacy theory brings attention to the beliefs that educators hold about their ability to create change together. Although the study found high levels of personal commitment to equity among the staff, this did not always translate into a shared sense of agency. In the absence of clear benchmarks, collaboration, or ongoing dialogue about EDI, many educators experienced equity work as isolated and reactive. Where collective efficacy was strong, such as in schools with distributed leadership and embedded support teams, participants spoke about inclusive practices that were more collaborative and proactive. This suggests that efforts to build collective efficacy must be intentional and relational, grounded in opportunities for educators to co-construct meaning, share responsibility, and experience the impact of their efforts

Limitations

This research offers a contribution to broader EDI inquiries by proposing a systems-level lens that other school organizations can find relevant or adaptable. That said, however, we should consider the study's limitations. The survey sample was relatively small, which reduces the generalizability of the quantitative findings. While the qualitative data provided rich insights, they represented a particular moment in time and might not capture the full range of experiences across the school division. Further research would benefit from longitudinal approaches and expanded participant representation, particularly from underrepresented community groups and students.

Implications

This study examined EDI in a large, diverse, Canadian school division through the lens of a multi-theoretical, mixed-methods approach. The findings revealed a school division with strong values of inclusivity, yet challenged by inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices, under-resourced realities, and the absence of cohesive strategies to guide and sustain progress. Insights from both survey data and focus groups indicated a clear message: EDI is both a widely supported yet complex process that must be navigated through policy, practice, and lived experience.

Taken together, the findings revealed a number of tensions that extend beyond immediate implications and suggest intentional responses going forward. There is a clear need for a shared framework for EDI across the school division that articulates a common language, guiding principles, and reflection tools for indicators of progress. A key systems response might include conducting a resource equity audit and developing role-specific guidelines to support inclusive planning and programming. A multi-year strategy to address physical barriers in school buildings would support issues of structural accessibility in the division. These actions would ensure that EDI is not left to individual interpretation or capacity but is supported by structures that promote access and responsiveness across school contexts.

Even when budget constraints continue to be a reality, opportunities to repurpose existing practices exist. Equity-informed hiring and leadership development strategies could be used to increase representation across all employee groups. Recruitment alone may be insufficient without clear pathways for advancement, supports and mentorship, as well as leadership opportunities for racialized and equity-deserving staff. Embedding EDI learning into regular professional development, creating learning communities, and reallocating existing collaboration time could better ensure that equity work is sustained. Finally, incorporating EDI expectations into existing planning and evaluation structures (continuous improvement documents, school plans or professional growth models) could help ensure that EDI is addressed as a core measure of leadership effectiveness. By engaging with complexity, this school division could move toward more responsive, relational, and sustainable approaches to EDI.

Conclusion

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are evolving commitments that require continuous reinterpretation within the lived realities of schools and communities. In the context of this urban division, this research illustrates how inclusive values, though widely affirmed, could be constrained by systemic misalignment, inconsistent implementation, and persistent barriers, such as limited resources and competing demands. These challenges did not stem from a lack of will, but from the absence of coordinated structures that would allow inclusive practices to be sustained and scaled. This study highlights that EDI is most effectively advanced when supported by a framework of shared language and practice, collective responsibility, and strategic capacity development, rather than being left to individual interpretation or isolated efforts. The analysis reveals a school division navigating the challenges of transformation, where aspirations for a just system coexist with identified constraints. Ultimately, when these tensions are addressed with courage and intent, they can become the starting point for future improvement and change.

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