

A CANADIAN COLLABORATION ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON A SIX-YEAR PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract: This paper examines the experiences of Canadian university researchers and school district staff who engaged in a 6-year collaborative series of research projects investigating school inclusion in a regional school division in Canada. As a capstone to the research projects, members of the research team engaged in a facilitated inquiry session to explore and articulate lessons learned about inclusion and collaboration throughout the span of the project. The key finding was that collaboration is a critical factor in both inclusive education and university-school district research partnerships. The reflections and experiences of the research team are examined and discussed. Collaboration is illustrated both as prerequisite to and corollary of university-school district research partnerships.

Keywords: Collaboration; University-school district collaboration; Inclusive education.

UMA COLABORAÇÃO CANADENSE NA EDUCAÇÃO INCLUSIVA: REFLEXÕES EM 6 ANOS DE PARCERIA

Resumo: Este artigo examina as experiências de pesquisadores de uma universidade canadense e de consultores distritais que se engajaram em projetos de pesquisa colaborativos durante seis anos, os quais investigaram a inclusão escolar na regional school division no Canadá. Como um elemento fundamental para o projeto de pesquisa, os membros da equipe engajaram-se em discussões voltadas a explorar e articular lições aprendidas sobre inclusão e colaboração durante todo o período do projeto. Os resultados indicam que a colaboração é um fator crítico na educação inclusiva e nas parcerias de pesquisas distritais universidade-empresa. As reflexões e as experiências da equipe de pesquisa foram analisadas e discutidas. Além disso, a colaboração é ilustrada como pré-requisito e como consequência de parcerias em pesquisas distritais entre universidade-escola.

Palavras-chave: Colaboração; Colaboração universidade-escola; Educação inclusiva.

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1. Introduction

Taking a look at inclusive practices wasn't about critique; it was more about exploration and wanting to understand if there had been progress in the district. We had a sense that we were doing something right – but we didn't know quite what that was, and we wanted to know if in fact we were doing it right. (PEMBINA HILLS REGIONAL SCHOOL DIVISION No.7, 2013).

Inclusion means that all students, including those with disabilities and other special needs, are educated in regular classrooms alongside age appropriate peers (PORTER; SMITH, 2011). In inclusive schools, teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators adapt and change how they work in order to meet the needs of all students (ANDREWS; LUPART, 2000; LOREMAN, 1999; LOREMAN; DEPPELER; HARVEY, 2010). Further,

Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students, accommodation of both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 11)

In Canada, education is governed provincially rather than federally. The Ministries of Education in each of the 13 Canadian provinces and territories have established policies indicating inclusion as the preferred option for educating students with disabilities. Despite provincial policies, segregated classrooms and segregated schools remain prevalent throughout jurisdictions.

One rural school district embarked on the journey to inclusion in the early 1990s. This paper explores the experiences of Canadian university researchers and school district administrators who engaged in a 6-year series of collaborative research projects investigating school inclusion in the Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7 in Alberta, Canada. We focus on the results of a facilitated inquiry session that served as a capstone to the research project. The reflections and experiences of the research team in conducting collaborative research are examined and discussed, illustrating characteristics of collaboration that support collaborative research in developing inclusive practices.

2. The context

Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7 (PHRD) is a public education school district spanning a large geographic area in north-central Alberta, a western Canadian province. The region includes the industrial oil town of Swan Hills to the northeast, the farming and lumber industry community of Fort Assiniboine, the agricultural and government service centers of Westlock and Barrhead, and farming communities such as Fawcett and Dunstable. The school division serves the rural towns and villages within the Counties of Woodlands, Barrhead, and Westlock, Alberta. The region's economic base is primarily agricultural, lumber, and the oil and gas industry. Seventeen schools in the district enroll approximately 4500 students attending five Kindergarten to Grade 6 schools (two smaller rural schools have been closed since the study began); four Kindergarten to Grade 9 or 10 schools; two Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools located in the

northern region of the district (one former Kindergarten to Grade 12 school has since changed its upper limit to Grade 9); two secondary-level schools serving students in Grades 7-12; one Grades 7-9 school; two Grades 1-9 schools serving two Hutterite Colonies; two outreach schools in the urban centres and one K-12 virtual school that serves the province). The division employs approximately 250 full time teaching staff and 600 support staff.

Schools range in size from 18 students in one of the Hutterite schools and a junior high school of 35 students to a larger elementary school of 650 and two junior/senior high schools of over 700. Class sizes are smaller in Kindergarten to Grade 3, averaging 17 or 18 students per class, with the largest class averages in junior high school with a mean of approximately 21 students.

PHRD has long used a funding model that encourages and mandates schools to meet the needs of all students, regardless of needs and ability. Funding is distributed to schools based on students' identified special needs. However, schools are responsible and accountable for addressing the needs of *all* students rather than providing specific services to those students with identified needs. This means that schools can allocate their resources to support students as soon as needs arise rather than waiting for formal assessments. As a result, some students with no formal identification, but who are struggling, receive much more support than those who have a specific diagnosis and are functioning successfully in the classroom.

School completion data for PHRD and the province shows that for all students with an special needs code, the rolling average (2007 to 2009) for school completion in 4 years was 48% for all of Alberta and 59% for PHRD. Alberta Education recognized PHRD as a "change agent" for inclusive practices in 2010. The PHRD district policy reflects their mandate of inclusion:

the placement of students with exceptional needs in regular school programs is based on a philosophy of equality, sharing, participation, and the worth and dignity of individuals. Most Albertans would agree that students with exceptional needs must be full participants in school and society. The students have the right to take part in regular activities, and when they do so, they have a better chance of developing their full potential. (PEMBINA HILLS REGIONAL SCHOOL DIVISION No. 7, 2004, p. 2).

PHRD's Annual Education Results Report 2013-2016 reports the current priorities as "engaged learners," and "success for all students," using "universal design for learning and differentiated instruction." Regional school divisions in Alberta are required to complete a Three Year Education Plan/Annual Education Results Report (AERR) containing both provincially mandated and locally identified measures. These measures are then compared to provincial averages and previous district performance to derive a rating of "concern," "acceptable," "good" or "excellent." Overall results in most categories have historically been in the "acceptable" or "good" range, with the exception of success for aboriginal students, which has consistently been rated as a "concern" (Pembina Hills Regional School Division No. 7, 2012).

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) has provided targeted funding since 1999 to assist school districts in developing projects to increase student learning. The PHRD AISI project for the current three-year cycle is universal design for learning and differentiated instruction. Previous cycles have focused on assessment for learning, school completion, student engagement, literacy and numeracy. A focus over the last decade has been the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at each school and bringing together teachers of similar grades and subjects from different schools to form

collaborative learning groups. A report commissioned by Alberta Education defines PLCs as “a group of professionals who focus on learning within a supportive, self-created community” (ALBERTA EDUCATION, 2006, p. 4). In PHRD, several days are devoted each year to professional development with half the days being focused on school developed topics and district days where all teacher and paraprofessionals are brought together in a central location. Mornings of district professional development days are devoted to collaborative learning groups, while the afternoons allow for focused information sessions.

3. The Research Studies

PHRD school district administrators approached academics at the University of Alberta and Concordia University of Edmonton proposing to conduct university research on inclusive education in PHRD. As a result, two consecutive and concurrent 3-year collaborative research projects were undertaken (i.e. Pembina Hills Project 1: PHP1; and, Pembina Hills Project 2: PHP2). Both projects were funded through the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) a federal funding agency for Canadian education research. The collaborative research work began with PHP1, a mixed method study that investigated inclusion in PHRD by first surveying key stakeholder groups within the district. These included students, parents, teachers, program assistants, administrators, and support staff. The next phase of PHP1 was a series of 10 qualitative case studies of individual students with and without identified special needs. The second research project, referred to as PHP2, followed. PHP2 was a qualitative study that focused on the perspectives and instructional practices of teachers in the district. Thus, over a 6-year period a series of quantitative and qualitative investigations of inclusion in the district revealed a composite picture of inclusion in PHRD.

The results of this research have been previously reported (see IRVINE, LUPART, LOREMAN; MCGHIE-RICHMOND, 2010; LOREMAN, 2011; LOREMAN; LUPART; MCGHIE-RICHMOND; BARBER, 2008; LOREMAN, MCGHIE-RICHMOND, BARBER; LUPART, 2008; MCGHIE-RICHMOND, IRVINE; LOREMAN; CIZMAN; LUPART, 2013; MCGHIE-RICHMOND; BARBER; LUPART; LOREMAN, 2009) and will not be discussed here. As the studies and the formal research collaboration was drawing to an end, the university and school district research team decided to meet for the purposes of reflecting on the research projects specifically, and collaborative university-school district partnerships, in general with a view to co-authoring and article on the experience.

Project participants engaged in a one-day reflective dialogue session aimed at exploring the progress that had been made in the district with respect to inclusion, as well as the research collaboration. Three questions guided the session:

1. What are participant views on the progress made in the project, and what evidence supports those views? Have there been changes in the educational community? If so, how so?
2. What was effective in terms of facilitating change and developing capacity for inclusive education in PHRD?
3. What were the challenges faced and how might they have been overcome?

The responses to these questions are addressed from three different perspectives: University

professors, university research assistants, and school district administrators. The participants in the reflective dialogue comprised key people who were involved in the research projects. They included 3 professors from 3 universities (2 Alberta universities and 1 British Columbia university), 2 research assistants, and 2 school district administrators. An academic, who was not involved in the research project but who is knowledgeable in the areas of research and inclusive education, facilitated the reflective dialogue session. Table 1 summarizes key demographic information on each participant.

Table 1: University-School District Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Years on project	Institution
University Researcher 1	M	6	Concordia University of Edmonton, Edmonton, AB
University Researcher 2	F	6	University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
University Researcher 3; Project Coordinator	F	6	University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
Research Assistant 1	F	6	University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
Research Assistant 2	F	3	University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
District Administrator 1	M	6	Student Services, Pembina Hills District No. 7, Barrhead, AB
District Administrator 2	F	1	Student Services, Pembina Hills District No. 7, Barrhead, AB

Source: Developed by the authors.

4. Capturing and Analyzing the Dialogue

Data were collected using a facilitated inquiry interview format. A series of questions designed to support reflection on the research experience guided the day. Participants were asked to write their response to each of the questions on post-it notes. Each member was then asked to share his or her response with the group. The post-it notes were collected. The facilitator made written notes of the key issues discussed and asked probing questions to explore them further. One of the participating research assistants also prepared typewritten notes of the discussions.

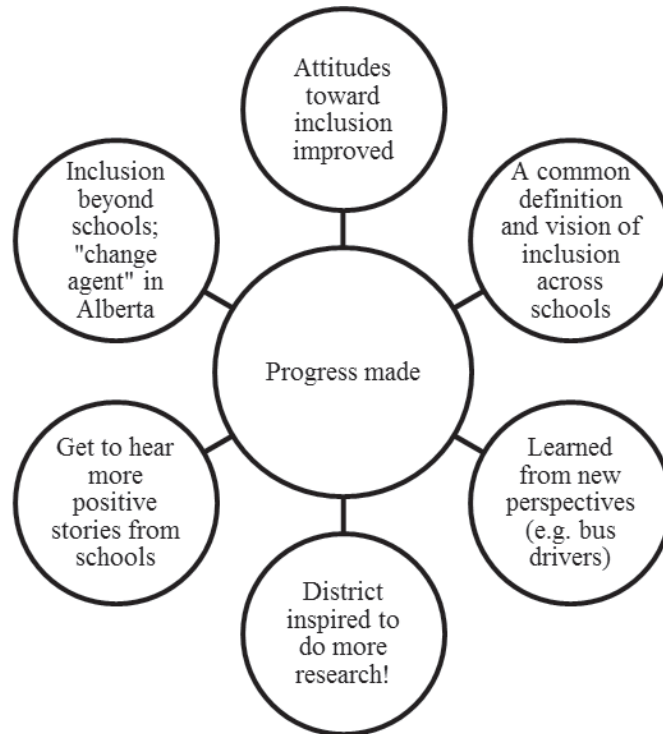
The data (i.e., participants' responses to the questions and written discussion notes) were analyzed by identifying key themes. The written responses from each member facilitated categorization for each question addressing the key themes of the project. The facilitator took additional notes on the key issues discussed and asked clarifying questions when necessary. Various issues discussed by the participants were grouped under different themes by the facilitator, prior to analyzing the information on the post it notes. At the conclusion of the session, the facilitator further reviewed the information on the post it notes, discussed the content with the research assistant, and presented the themes to the participants to ensure that views of the members were not misrepresented.

5. Results and Discussion: Addressing the Questions

The first guiding question asked, 'What are participant views on the progress made in the project, and what evidence supports those views? Have there been changes in the educational community? If so,

how so?' Figure 1 summarizes six themes with respect to the participants' views of the progress made.

Figure 1. Progress made in the project.



Source: Developed by the authors.

All participants indicated that the team had learned more about inclusive education as practiced in PHRD, and also that participants in the district had learned more about their own practice through involvement in the research projects. The participants cited the positive stories of inclusion in schools that were revealed as a result of the research. As school district administrator 2 shared, “The power of story is really critical.” The school district administrators noted that this project was a significant catalyst in encouraging schools to look for positive practices in their schools. District administrator 1 stated, “All I used to hear from schools was complaints or what was going wrong. This project gave me an opportunity to identify what was working well in schools.” On the other hand, university researcher 1 stated, “We saw unfiltered truths...not [always] a showcase of best practices, it’s not helpful to only know the good things”. District administrator we agreed:

“[the] school district didn’t want to just see the successes. Teachers were encouraged to talk about what they really experienced and not to just say what they thought was ‘politically correct.’ We thought we were doing some good things but we wanted to know how to get better.”

It was acknowledged that this research also allowed schools to hear perspectives that were not typically heard. For example, in this project, bus drivers across the schools were interviewed to identify inclusive practices. Even though all schools in PHRD value each member of the school community, interviewing the bus drivers raised the profile of every member of the school community. The bus drivers were acknowledged as important members of the community with valued input. Including the perspectives of all stakeholders demonstrated to school communities that all voices would be heard regardless of the scope

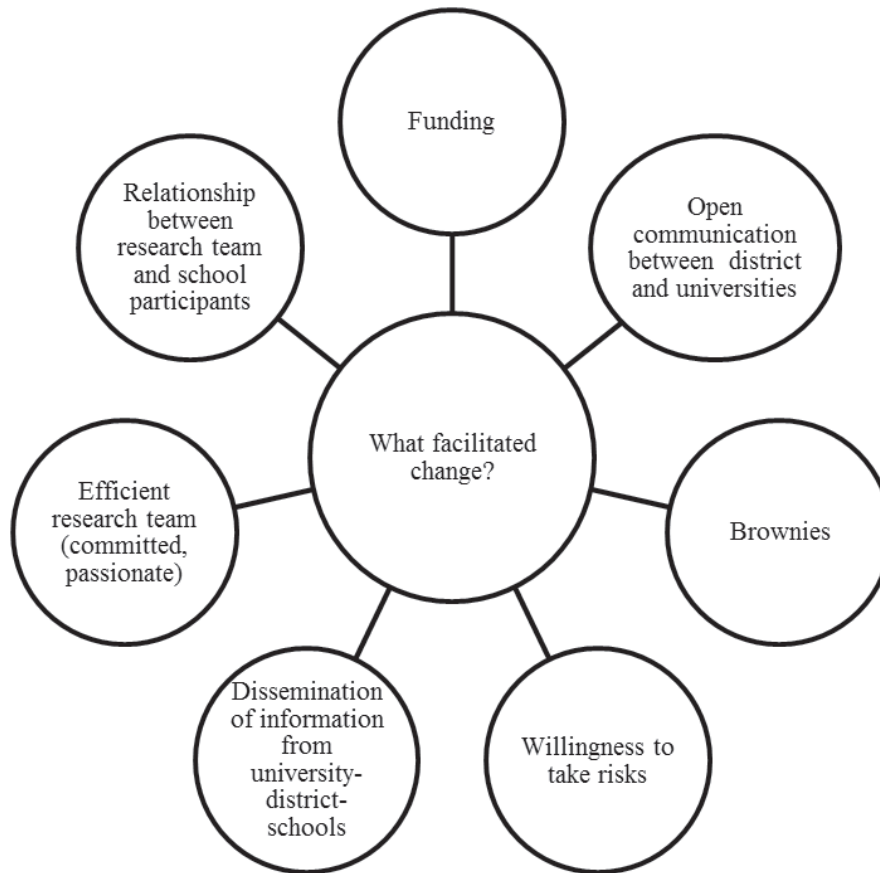
of their role in inclusive education.

Both district administrators perceived that a united and clearer definition of what inclusion means *within* the district was now present; that they “were clearer about what they mean by inclusion” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 1). The subsequent hiring of District Administrator 2 for an inclusion-specific position towards the end of this research project attests to the district’s ongoing and increasing commitment to inclusion. They refer to this role as ‘inclusion cartographer’, one who maps inclusive practice in the district. Further, the district administrators discussed the concept and practice of inclusion as extending both before school entry and beyond school completion, with an emphasis on developing “one seamless plan” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 1), linking the home and transitioning to adult services. The district administrators also discussed their sense of an overall increase in positive attitudes towards inclusion in the district. However, they raised the need to seek objective evidence of this change in attitude. It was decided that a post-survey of stakeholder perceptions would be a good next step. The results of this survey research are currently being analyzed. This realization on the part of the district administrators attested to their understanding of the value of conducting research in their district. This research, they believed, would provide defensible evidence of changing attitudes and practice. In their work on forces that serve as drivers of change in education, Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher (2005) discuss the importance of developing cultures of evaluation. They argue, “A culture of evaluation must be coupled with a culture of learning for schools to sort out promising from not-so-promising ideas and especially to deepen the meaning of what is learned” (FULLAN; CUTTRESS; KILCHER, 2005, p. 56). Beyond developing cultures of evaluation, the authors assert that leadership is the most important driver of change and advocate for “seeking leaders who represent innovativeness — the capacity to develop leadership in others on an ongoing basis” (FULLAN; CUTTRESS; KILCHER, 2005, p. 57). In seeking to develop further understanding of practices in the district through ongoing research, the District Administrators display the innovativeness required for progress and change.

5.1 Facilitators of change

The second research question asked, ‘What was effective in terms of facilitating change and developing capacity for inclusive education in PHRD?’ Figure 2 summarizes 7 themes arising from the data that are deemed to have facilitated inclusive education change and the development of capacity.

Figure 2. Factors facilitating change.



Source: Developed by the authors.

Funding support for the research projects was identified as fundamental to and a catalyst for the collaborative examination of inclusive education policies and practices in this district. The funded research projects brought the school district and university researchers together to explore inclusion in the district schools. It was acknowledged that the research endeavour involved considerable risk on the part of PHRD, as expressed by District Administrator 2, “courage to take the risk and not know what the results might be”. This willingness to take a risk was an important catalyst for change in the district, further explored below in the discussion about challenges. Bi-weekly (i.e., every two weeks) research team meetings supported close and ongoing communication of the research activities and results among the university and district researchers and was identified as a key facilitator of change in the district. The team meetings were initiated, organized and led by the university team members with agenda items reflecting the trajectory of research activities from instrument development, to details of data collection, analysis, and dissemination. About half way through the projects, one former district administrator (who had since retired during the research project) brought to the team’s attention that the agendas for the meetings were ‘university-oriented’; thereafter, a standing item was added to the meeting agendas that reflected school district concerns and interests. This was a stark reminder to the university research team of how something as seemingly simple as an agenda item (or in this case the omission of an agenda item) can be perceived by team members as inclusive or noninclusive. Communication underlies establishing collaborative working relations on projects. All perspectives need to be included in team discussions. As District Administrator 1 remarked, “[It] felt like a partnership where we could ask things back.”

Communication and reciprocity have been consistently acknowledged as critical factors in effective university-school district collaborative research. In their work on university-school action research to support inclusion, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2004) found that communication and shared planning are essential in strengthening collaboration. Furthermore, it is crucial that meeting agendas reflect the needs and interests of all partners involved in the collaborative research. Negotiating both research and meeting agendas, and changing direction if necessary, are important aspects of fostering effective research partnerships (YASHKINA; LEVIN, 2008). As the stark reminder above highlights, “if university–school research partnerships are to be viable then there have to be mutual benefits, reciprocity and a genuine coalition of interest” (BAUMFIELD; BUTTERWORTH, 2007, p. 414). The need for “continuous dialogue and responsiveness between the partners” is echoed by Aness, Barnett, and Allen (2007, p. 333), as a foundation for developing and maintaining the trust required for effective university-school district research partnerships.

‘Brownies’ represent the ‘gift of food’ that the research team brought to the schools when conducting data collection. The researchers were welcomed into the staff rooms at each school and they typically brought food, such as ‘two-bite’ brownies, cookies, fruit and candies which were invariably noted, welcomed, and appreciated by the school staff. This simple gesture facilitated the establishment of warm relations between the university researchers and the school community. As Research Assistant 1 stated, “we made ourselves visible in the school culture”; similarly University Researcher 3 shared the observation, “We were a presence”. The quality of the researchers’ presence in schools has been acknowledged as another important factor in supporting constructive research partnerships (BAUMFIELD; BUTTERWORTH, 2007). Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2004) described the multifaceted impact of their presence as research partners in schools: “In working in the schools, we have been conscious that what we do may be at least as important as what we say, and that our school colleagues are noting our styles of working. In other words, the medium is the message!” (p. 132).

The ‘message’ sent by establishing warm relations in the school district was that the researchers were interested in learning about and connecting with the school context and culture, another important aspect of building strong collaborations (DEPPELER, 2006). Additionally, in expressing warmth and respect towards school district research partners, the researchers were “welcomed into the schools – the educators were collaborators” (UNIVERSITY RESEARCHER 3).

Having one person as the point of contact in each school also supported communication and efficient planning. In most schools this person was the Principal or Assistant Principal. Scheduling school visits with a large team was a challenge; however, the university researchers became more efficient and effective in collecting data over time.

While there was considerable change in some research assistants over the lifespan of the research project, the consistent university researchers and research coordinator along with two consistent research assistants, were identified as being highly supportive of establishing relationships between the schools and university researchers. “The research was so ‘friendly’, it allowed them [teachers] to see how the research is relevant to their practice” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 2). Further, the informal connections and conversations that took place in the schools enriched the data collection process. The district administrators referred to the research project as ‘planting seeds’: “The research planted seeds for educators to reflect on practice. Research is not this extra thing, but part of our learning” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR

2). District Administrator 2 continues, “After the researchers left, it caused educators to talk and reflect on their practice.” Deppeler (2010) echoes the finding of educators becoming increasingly engaged in research processes, in discussing teacher professional learning through collaborative inquiry: “As teachers became more competent and confident in engaging with evidence in order to understand their practices, they became more confident in developing and testing pedagogy and reframing assessment practices” (p. 185). Akin to the notion of ‘planting seeds’ for educators to reflect on practice, Deppeler argues that, in the case of professional learning, it “should be reframed from something that is done to teachers to something that teachers continue to do together” (2010, p. 180). Reflection on inclusive practice also helps build further investment in the collaborative research process. While the formal research program has concluded in PHRD, there continues to be a focus on research in the district: “the money has run out but we’re still at the table” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 2). The increased emphasis on inquiring into inclusive practices in the district has served to both facilitate change and inspire ongoing research: “We definitely feel like doing more research like this” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 1). This ongoing aspiration to conduct research connects with Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher’s (2005) notion of strong leadership discussed above.

5.2 Challenges Experienced

The participants identified and discussed the challenges that were experienced in the research projects, guided by question 3, ‘What were the challenges faced and how might they have been overcome?’

The responses of the research participants revealed a number of challenges that emerged throughout the project, as well as factors that were perceived to address the challenges. Figures 3 and 4, respectively, illustrate the themes that arose from examining the challenges that were experienced, as well as how the team addressed the challenges.

Figure 3. Challenges experienced



Source: Developed by the authors.

While external funding support made the research possible, it also posed challenges to conducting the research, particularly PHP2 that focused on teacher practices. Considerably less funding was awarded for PHP2 which meant that the research design needed to be significantly downsized. This delayed the start of the second research project as extended dialogue amongst the school district and research team was needed to determine a revised research design that would provide a feasible way to address the research questions, given the funding and realities of the school environment.

The required Human Research Ethics Board approval in each university and the school district also posed challenges. The differing requirements of each university's ethics applications and review and approval processes delayed the research process with the second research project. Tilley, Killins, and Van Oosten (2005) have identified the separation between school district research review and university research ethics boards as representing a common, yet understudied, challenge in collaborative university-school district research.

Further, factors such as the inherent complexity of managing the funds of a large-scale research project over the lifespan of the project with little-to-no university administrative support, as well as onrelying on early career academic researchers, were challenging (UNIVERSITY RESEARCHER 1). There was considerable turnover in research assistants over the duration of the research projects, which is not atypical in multi-year research projects. However, it is also worth noting that none of the research assistants who participated in these projects undertook their own graduate-level research based on the data from these projects. The turnover in research assistants compromised communication on the research team and slowed the data analysis process considerably as new research assistants had to be sought and trained. for the project. On the other hand, the participants acknowledged that the variety and range of research experience and expertise on the team provided fertile ground for learning how to conduct multi-method, multi-year research projects.

Pembina Hills District 7 is a rural district spread across more than 8000 square kilometers at 120 kilometres distance from the two Alberta universities. The distance between the district and the universities, as well as the distance between schools within the school district itself, were also identified by the participants as challenges on the project. The team had to coordinate activities across schools in a manner that allowed them to use travel funds and time efficiently. The team often stayed overnight in the central community of Westlock in order to facilitate an early morning start for data collection in the schools. An added benefit for the university research team was the opportunity that this afforded to meet immediately after being in the schools and for an extended period of time to discuss the data collection process. "There was a lot of conversation on the data collection in the team" (RESEARCH ASSISTANT2).

This theme relates closely to the next challenge: lack of time both for researchers and schools. The team collected data in 15 schools in the district. This not only required availability of substantial time to travel, but also a commitment from schools to be available at the time the researchers visited. Considerable coordination and flexibility was required on the part of the university team. The District Administrators also identified time as an issue with regard to scheduling interviews and classroom observations, as well as communicating information and research results with the teachers.

Figure 4. Addressing the challenges.



Source: Developed by the authors.

The challenges experienced in the project were addressed in several ways by the research team. A team approach to acknowledging and addressing the challenges was followed. The participants concurred that responsive and ongoing communication amongst all team members to ensure understanding of the issues and challenges, as well as shared decision-making was essential. A clear delineation of team members' roles and responsibilities were negotiated and followed. For example, PHRD District Administrators recognized the expertise of the university researchers with regard to research methodology: "it was important to have research conducted with the strength of people who have a research background" (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 1). District Administrator 2 echoed this assertion: "it seems bizarre not to use a connection between colleges and university and helping school districts". Thus, while the district administrators were involved in the conversations about the methodology, they supported the university researchers taking the lead. In terms of addressing the challenge of lack of funding and the subsequent downsizing of the research project, the process of planning a new research approach together with the school district that would work given funding constraints resulted in strengthening the collaborative research process. While the reduction in research funds was initially regarded as a barrier, it turned into a strength.

There was also a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities at the university team level. A post-doctoral researcher took on project management for both projects and subsequently mentored a doctoral candidate to take on the role of project management of PHP2. Team members were willing to step outside of their designated roles and responsibilities to be flexible, 'pitch in', and take over when needed, which was challenging and required considerable flexibility at times. This flexibility was especially critical when there was turnover in the research assistant and project management roles. The continuum of experience amongst university researchers and research assistants encouraged a mentor-mentee relationship

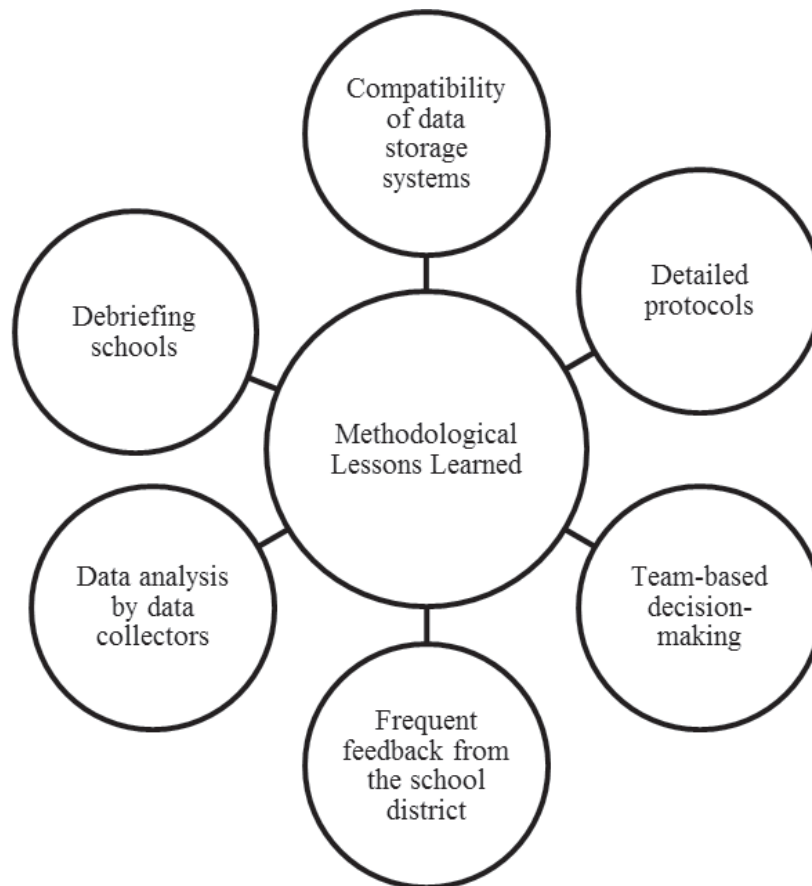
to develop among team members, in support of developing knowledge and expertise among all members.

‘Risk-taking’ also emerged as a means by which challenges were addressed. Indeed, taking risks and the willingness to experiment have been cited as effective strategies to advance collaborative research between universities and school districts (BAUMFIELD; BUTTERWORTH, 2007; YASHKINA; LEVIN, 2008). From the outset, the District took a risk by initiating and actively engaging in this research project to determine their progress with respect to inclusive education. Risks, however, are always balanced with possible benefits. While there was risk involved in opening the district to research investigation, as District Administrator 1 notes, “it helped that the district felt ‘safe’ at the time”, in that the motivation to review inclusive practices was not in response to critique from parents or interest groups.

5.3 Methodological lessons learned

During the reflective discussion, the researchers noted several key points about the research studies’ methodology. These are summarized in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Methodological lessons learned.



Source: Developed by the authors.

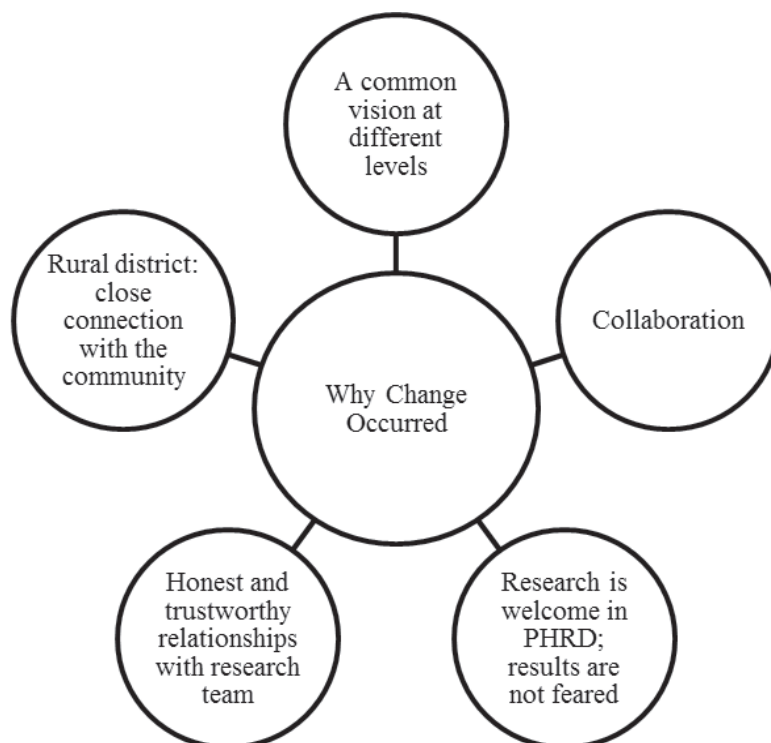
When embarking on research spanning several years with multiple researchers and assistants, it is critical to ensure storage and regular back up of data on compatible devices that are kept in a central and consistent location. To ensure data security, two hard-drives containing all data were maintained along with further hard drives for data currently under analysis. Careful attention to and documenting the details

of instrumentation and data collection protocols at every step in the project supports not only standardization of implementation across the studies, but also supports the preparation of new research assistants as they join the project. As the research assistants shared, joining the project created a “steep learning curve with the instruments” (RESEARCH ASSISTANT 2) and “coming into the project after it started [required] lots of catch-up” (RESEARCH ASSISTANT 1). A consistent project manager was identified early on as a key role in this research. As with a team problem-solving approach, team-decision making was essential to ensure that the project ran as smoothly as possible. The researchers and assistants who were involved in collecting the data in the schools were also involved in analyzing the data. This supported the data analysis process and added facilitated analysis and interpretation of the data, particularly the qualitative data stemming from the interviews and classroom observations. It also facilitated dissemination of the results. Reporting to the schools on the activities and results of the research at regular intervals provided them with information on the progress of the studies, reminding them of the purposes for their involvement in the research study. Researchers prepared summary reports for the district and individual schools which school district administrators then shared on a regular basis at meetings of school-based administrators and special education staff. Researchers also participated in several PHRD meetings and district professional development events. Reporting to the teachers in the district was a key way of soliciting “buy in from all”, as well as “disseminating the message” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 2).

5.4 Why Change Occurred

In the reflection discussion, participants shared the perception that the district had progressed in inclusive education over the lifespan of the research project, largely as a result of the collaborative research. Upon further probing for the underlying reasons for the change, several themes emerged. These are summarized in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Reasons for the change in the district



Source: Developed by the authors.

A common vision shared at various school division and school levels, close connections with the community, honest and trustworthy relationships with the university research team, an atmosphere of openness, and understanding the role of research in informing practice and changing thinking, along with a willingness to take risks, and the collaborative nature of the work, were cited by the district administrators as primary reasons for the changes in inclusive policy and practice observed in the school district.

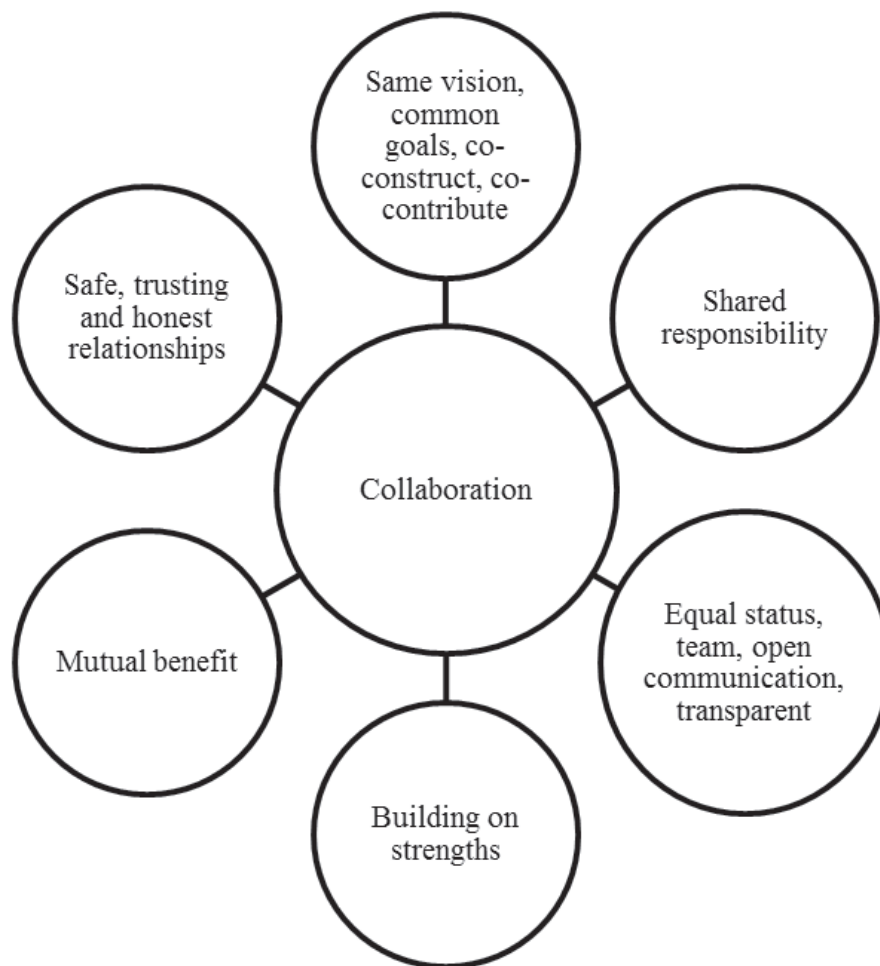
Initially, inclusive practice in PHRD developed as a “rural necessity” (MCGHIE-RICHMOND et al., 2013). The distances between schools meant that most schools could not have had congregated programs because of the impracticality of getting the student to a special or separate location. However, around the time the research partnership was established, the district was moving away from “inclusion created by necessity” and towards inclusive practice for “philosophical and pedagogical reasons” (DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR 1). In the words of District Administrator 1:

“Since the research has begun we’ve eliminated all congregated settings, but I think the bigger gain has been how we’ve evolved our thinking on inclusion. We had physical inclusion and have moved on to social inclusion and are now trying to master that, meaning access to the curriculum for all... Some of the evidence is more subtle, such as the amalgamation of our district curriculum and special education departments into one: “education services.”

This evolution in thinking about inclusion represents a closing of the gap between theory and practice, which is considered both an intention of, and one of the primary positive outcomes associated with, collaborative research (AINSCOW; BOOTH; DYSON, 2004; BAUMFIELD; BUTTERWORTH, 2007). Describing their collaborative research with school districts, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2004) outline their aims: “The ideal we aspire to here is a process through which critical appraisal leads to understandings that can have an immediate and direct impact on the development of thinking and practice in the field” (p. 128). The collaborative university-school district research process in PHRD sought not only to better understand inclusion in the district, but also to *improve* inclusive practice in the district. As the passage above demonstrates, the research resulted in changes in thinking and understanding about inclusion as well as in practice (such as the integration of district curriculum and special education departments into one).

These reasons for change in the district can be seen threaded through the themes and responses to each of the questions posed during this reflective dialogue session. Similarly, a number of the factors align with the characteristics of collaboration and are indeed repeated in the participants’ responses when asked to define collaboration. These responses are summarized in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Participants' Definition of Collaboration



Source: Developed by the authors.

Throughout the reflective discussion, the participants identified collaboration as a foundation that supports inclusive practice and research. The participants defined collaboration as a shared responsibility where team members are considered equal in status and build on the particular strengths of each member. Team members *co-construct* and *co-contribute* towards defining as well as achieving common goals and vision that are mutually beneficial. Open, transparent communication was perceived to be both foundational to and necessary for the development of trusting and honest relationships. These characteristics work in concert to build a safe working environment within which team members take risks that enhance the research process.

The characteristics of collaboration cited by the participants have long defined the concept of collaboration in the research literature on teaching students who have special needs (COOK; FRIEND, 1991; FRIEND, 2000; FRIEND; COOK, 2007) and as predictors of success in school reform for inclusion (DEPPELER, 2006; FRIEND; COOK, 1990). Friend and Cook (2007) define collaboration as “a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 7). McGhie-Richmond (2009) further highlights key characteristics of collaboration. Collaboration is voluntary; that is people choose to collaborate. Collaboration requires parity among those who are working together. Parity implies equal value for contributions and decision-making power. The goals or purpose for collaboration are mutual or shared as is accountability for the outcomes.

Similarly, Goulet, Krentz, and Christianson (2003) summarize collaboration as follows:

In collaboration, individuals come together for a purpose. Participants develop relationships that create a group. From the work of that group, both process and product outcomes emerge. The salient features of collaboration--the ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of becoming--shape and define the process as collaborative. Throughout the process these features are always present with one or more aspects of each dominant at any given time (p. 9).

In line with Goulet, Krentz, and Christianson (2003) and Friend and Cook (2007), participants in the reflection discussion expressed a shared understanding that collaboration is viewed as a *style of working* rather than a specific set of procedures. Ainscow, Howes, Farrell and Frankham (2003) noted the proliferation of “recipe-like suggestions” on how to develop inclusive practices (p. 228). In examining a series of university-school district collaborative research projects, the authors maintained, “Our analysis of their activities leads us to conclude that progress will not be achieved by following recipes. Rather it requires processes of social learning within given contexts” (2003, p. 228). The process of social learning involved in investigating inclusive practices in PHRD developed within its own unique context; namely, that PHRD District Administrators approached researchers to the conduct an inquiry into inclusive practices in PHRD. As Goulet, Krentz, and Christianson (2003) note, “Collaboration invites rather than mandates” (p. 11). The invitation to collaborate was impactful for the researchers in this project: “It was really powerful that the school district approached the research team! When we’ve approached school districts there have occasionally been problems” (UNIVERSITY RESEARCHER 2).

However, an invitation to collaborate does not inherently ensure that the process will be conducted collaboratively. In the words of Goulet, Krentz, and Christianson (2003), “Collaboration can be compromised by the constraints of differing social, cultural, and political contexts and the power differentials in those contexts’ (p. 11). With regards to power differentials, it is not uncommon for research agendas to be driven by university researchers – which speaks to the above mentioned ‘problems’ that could be experienced by school districts approached by researchers. However, as illustrated above in the example of a university-driven research agenda that did not adequately include district concerns, when a collaborative process is compromised there are opportunities to re-establish healthy collaboration through raised awareness, being responsive, and amending practice.

6. Concluding Remarks

The term ‘collaboration’ is pervasive in education at all levels. Collaboration is also well documented in the research literature as an essential factor in university-school district research to support inclusion in schools (AINSCOW; BOOTH; DYSON, 2005; BAUMFIELD; BUTTERWORTH, 2007; DEPPELER, 2006; FRIEND; COOK, 1990). One of the central meta-findings of the Pembina Hills research projects described in the present study is that collaboration is crucial for effective inclusion, both as it pertains to practice in the district, as well as how it facilitated the partnership responsible for the research. Indeed, Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7’s district motto, ‘Together we Learn’ embodies the prominent role played by collaboration in this partnership. Working collaboratively across institutions to conduct relevant, meaningful research and inquiry is complex. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2004) express it well, “as we

learn how to do collaborative action research, we note the complexity of what is involved” (2004, p. 135). Given its complexity, collaborative research holds numerous challenges (FULLAN, 2006; YASHKINA; LEVIN, 2008), the meeting of which requires flexibility on many levels (DEPPELER, 2006). As described through the reflections of the school district and university partners engaged in the research collaboration and shared in this paper, flexibility helped to strengthen the research process and subsequent practice outcomes. Despite associated challenges, collaborative research holds tremendous potential for developing effective inclusive practice through interdependent partnerships between universities and school districts.

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