

Discovering the Principals' Understanding of Inclusion and Inclusive Practices: The Case of Notre-Dame Schools in Vietnam

Cécilia Vu Quang Diem Chi, CND-CSA^{1*}

¹ Congrégation Notre-Dame - Chanoineses de Saint-Augustin

* Corresponding author's email: diemchicnd@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6584-1682>

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Abstract

This study aims to discover how the principals interpret inclusion and their inclusive practices at Notre Dame (CND) schools in Vietnam; hence, the research questions that guide this study are: 1) How do principals of the CND schools interpret inclusion? 2) How do the principals of the CND schools practice inclusion in terms of developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting a culturally responsive/inclusive school environment, and engaging students, parents, and indigenous contexts? This study uses the Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework as the conceptual framework. The research design is a multiple-case study that is conducted at all five CND schools in Vietnam. The data collection instruments are semi-structured interviews with five principals of CND schools, mini-surveys for teachers and parents, and documentation. Through cross-case analysis, eight themes emerge and indicate that CND principals believe that in order to implement inclusion effectively, it is necessary to have great hope for students' growth in education and a commitment to providing equal learning opportunities for all students. Then, through situational leadership and leadership as graced companionship, the principals develop inclusive educators for their schools, make some school adaptations, create their school as a "common home" for all stakeholders, and build an educational community to engage diverse individuals and organizations in their inclusive educational mission. These themes are organized in a framework as an initial view of how inclusive education is being implemented at CND schools in Vietnam. This framework can be used as a foundation for the development programs of CND schools on the way to becoming inclusive institutions based on the criteria identified by international organizations.

Keywords:

understanding of inclusion, inclusive practices, principal's role, culturally responsive school leadership, case study, Vietnam

Introduction

Derived from educational programs for students with disabilities, the term “inclusive education” appeared in the late 20th century, which aimed to reject exclusion and encourage education for all. In the 21st century, UNESCO defines inclusive education as a system that respects diversity and eliminates all forms of discrimination in the learning environment (UNESCO, n.d.).

Vietnam is a diverse country with 54 ethnic groups, and about 1.2 million children with disabilities. Moreover, a large wave of migration from rural provinces to cities also increases the diversity in the big cities, not to mention thousands of expats come to this country every year. Hence, the diverse population of Vietnam requires the application of the broad definition of inclusive education of UNESCO. In fact, the Vietnam Law on Education in 2019 for the first time has identified inclusive education as an education modality that respects diversity, meets different needs and abilities of learners, ensures equal learning rights and quality. However, no evidence has been found that the new law is being implemented in schools. Inclusive education is still considered an approach that serves only students with disabilities in the context of general education (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

Congregation Notre-Dame (CND) was established in France in the 16th century to response to educational needs of female children. In Vietnam, CND is in charge of five inclusive schools where welcome all students despite their ability or socioeconomic background. Through their educational mission, CND sisters want to make children and all school stakeholders grow comprehensively in their educational communities. However, there is no written document about that.

In order to successfully and professionally implement inclusive education in CND schools, this study aims to explore how CND principals interpret inclusion and their inclusive practices in schools. It is hoped that the findings of this study will serve as the need assessment for the school leader preparation and professional development program of CND schools. Moreover, the results of the research can become one of the guidelines for CND principals in implementing inclusion, so that no child will be left behind in CND schools.

In this study, the Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework (Culturally Responsive School Leadership Institute [CRSLI], 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016) with four elements can be used as a research protocol to generate research questions and prepare interview questions, to discover principals’ understanding of inclusion and inclusive practices at CND schools in Vietnam.

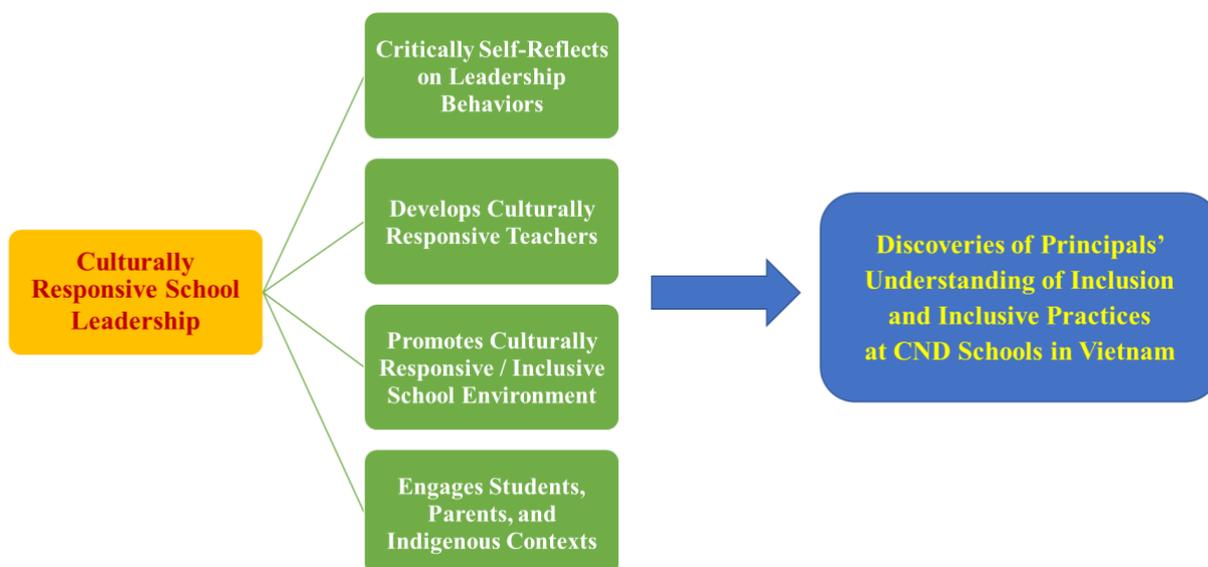


Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

Hence, the research questions that guide this study are 1) How do principals of the CND schools interpret inclusion? (Critically self-reflects on leadership behavior); 2) How do the principals of the CND schools practice inclusion in terms of (a) developing culturally responsive teachers, (b) promoting culturally responsive/ inclusive school environment, (c) engaging students, parents, and indigenous contexts?

Methodology

The research design is multiple-case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014) conducted at all five CND schools in Vietnam from December 2021 to April 2022. The table about characteristics of CND schools shows that all five CND schools in Vietnam are considered as inclusive schools with diverse students of different abilities and socioeconomic family backgrounds, and the school locations are in culturally diverse communities.

Table 1*Characteristics of CND Schools in Vietnam (School Year 2021 – 2022)*

Participant	School name	School location	Number of Students	General family background of students	Student characteristic
Principal 1	A Kindergarten	Center of the biggest city	200	Middle-class/ rich family	50 % autistic students
Principal 2	B Kindergarten	Industrial township	375	Migrant and worker family	9% autistic students
Principal 3	C Primary School	Suburban district of the biggest city	98	Poor and migrant family	7% autistic students 13% slow learners
Principal 4	D Secondary School	Suburban district of the biggest city	95	Poor and migrant family	3% disabled students
Principal 5	E Primary School	Central highlands region	121	Poor famers	73% minority students 7% disabled students

In order to establish the validity of this study, triangulation was used by collecting data through multiple data collection instruments, which were semi-structured interviews, mini-surveys, and documentation. Base on the CRSL Framework as a research protocol, the individual semi-structured interviews with the five principals included open-ended questions. Due to the pandemic, these interviews were conducted synchronously via Zoom through Vietnamese language. Each interview lasted from two and a half to three hours. After getting the results from interviews with five principals, the mini-surveys with the questionnaires based on these results were sent to all teachers and parents of five CND schools through Google Forms. The school activities and administrative documents were requested and collected by email, to corroborate information from the interviews (Yin, 2014).

There are 2 phases of data analysis – within-case and cross-case analysis. For within-case analysis, each case was first considered as a comprehensive case. The interview data were transcribed, translated into English, manual coded in Microsoft Excel separately for each research question in each case. Then, the codes and categories emerged and were constructed on each research question at a time for each case. Several themes emerged related to the principals' understanding of inclusion and their inclusive practices. The data collected from the mini-surveys and documentation were also analyzed and presented in each case, combining with the interview data to get the validity and reliability of the case study.

When all five cases were individually analyzed, the cases were combined to be cross-case analyzed to see which were common and uncommon in all cases. The researcher compared the individual cases, and then searched for patterns that cut across themes to construct a general explanation that fits all individual cases (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014).

Results and Discussion

From with-in case analysis, it was clear that each school was comprised of different context, school size and organization, teaching methods, student and teachers characteristics, relationships and struggles. Besides, the principals were different in age, qualification, and experience. The differences of the school settings and the principals' characteristics generated some unique discoveries in each case.

Through cross-case analysis, the commonalities of five cases could be determined; then, eight common themes across CND schools and principals emerged addressing the research questions.

The emerged themes presented that CND principals had great hopes for change and development of all students. They affirmed that student development is the goal of education, pushing children to the maximum development; all students can learn and develop because each has their own talents and potentials that educators should discover and develop. Additionally, CND principals saw great hope in students with SEN and showed that these students made gradual progress in their inclusive environment through the patient and proper interventions. This hope in the student development through education inspired CND principals to give equal learning opportunities to all students by welcoming all students with diverse abilities or backgrounds, treating all equally, and providing equal learning conditions for all. Thus, while interpreting inclusion, CND principals expressed their hopes for student growth through education and their commitment to providing equal learning opportunities for all students. These understandings are derived from CND's educational spirit (CND, 2010, 2014, 2022), and are close to the modern approach to inclusive education of UNESCO and other authors (Hehir et al., 2016; Jenkins & Sileo, 1994; OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 1994, 2005).

Furthermore, CND principals reflected that while leading their schools, most of them used situational leadership (Hersey et al., 1979; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012), a way of leading based on the follower capacity and on the situation. Moreover, all principals preferred the leadership as graced companionship that saw leadership as a communal and shared process, with a positive relationship between leader and followers (Garvin, 2013). The literature review proved that by leading through these leadership styles, CND principals are going in the same rhythm with principals of effective inclusive schools (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Lyons, 2016; Osiname, 2015; Sider et al., 2017).

The common themes showed that CND principals made some efforts to develop for their schools the inclusive educators who were imbued with CND educational spirit, good at expertise, collaborated with each other, and dedicated themselves to inclusive education. These characteristics of CND teachers coincide with the teacher's qualities of effective inclusive schools (EADSNE, 2012).

Furthermore, CND principals made adaptations in school facilities, policy and organization, and a pedagogy for all to make their schools ready to welcome diverse students. Those practices showed that CND principals embraced the same opinion with other authors and organizations, because they believed that in an inclusive learning environment, not only the SEN students

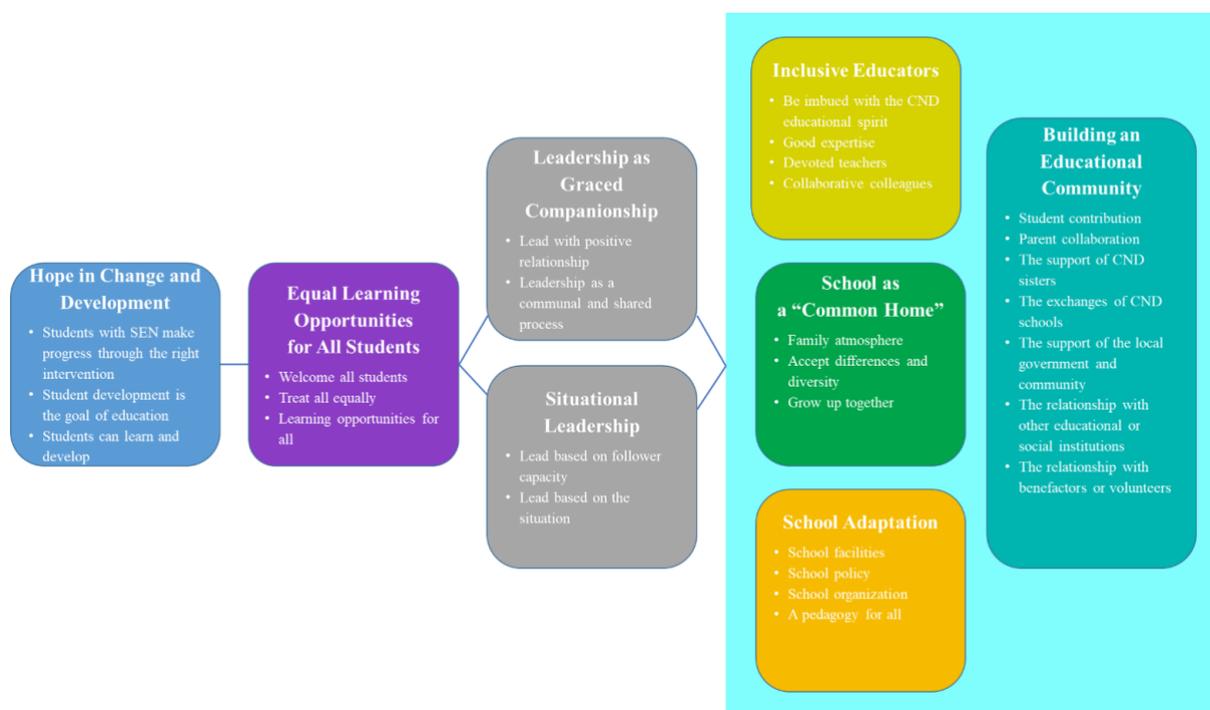
made efforts to include in the general school, but the school also had to make some adaptation to their diverse students (Alzahrani, 2020; Cologon, 2013; CRPD, 2016).

The emerged themes presented similar characteristics of learning environment in CND schools with other effective inclusive schools (Budiarti & Sugito, 2018; Lyons, 2016; Lyons et al., 2016; Osiname, 2015; Riehl, 2000; Setia et al., 2021). It proved that CND principals had some successes in making their school a “common home” where all stakeholders feel the family atmosphere, accept the diversity, and encourage one another to grow. This inclusive learning environment carried the hallmarks of CND’s educational spirit (CND, 2022).

Lastly, the collected data showed that CND principals paid attention to build for their school an educational community with the student contribution, the parent collaboration, the support of CND sisters, the exchanges of CND schools, the support of the local government and community, the relationship with other educational or social institutions, or with benefactors and volunteers.

Figure 2.

Emergent Framework for Implementing Inclusive Education at CND Schools in Vietnam



The common themes were organized in a framework as an initial view on how inclusive education is being implemented at CND schools in Vietnam. This framework can be used as a foundation for the development programs of CND schools on the way to become inclusive institutions based on the criteria identified by international organizations.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to provide the general view on the principals’ understanding of inclusion and their inclusive practices as a foundational step for professional and effective implementation of inclusion at CND schools in Vietnam. Finding the way to build and develop effective inclusive schools which imprint the CND educational spirit is the ultimate goal of this

research, so that CND schools become places where all students grow up comprehensively in a positive educational community.

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Biodata

Cécilia Vu Quang Diem Chi is a Sister of the Congrégation Notre-Dame - Chanoinesses de Saint-Augustin - CND-CSA.