

APPROACHES TO BARRIERS IN INCLUSION & DISABILITY

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Nations around the world are moving toward educational inclusion of learners with disabilities. In Southern nations, India is a leader and innovator in reform of education for learners with disabilities. Canada is representative of various Northern nations and what approaches they are taking.

No matter what actions are taken with regard to inclusive education and disability in any nation, there remains more to be done, more lesser and greater barriers to be overcome. We will speak primarily on the Canadian experience, though we also may use a few examples from other nations.

First let us say that, in our experience, we understand inclusive education, in its most meaningful sense, to refer to those groups of learners not yet permitted access to regular classroom settings. Depending on the nation, this can refer to a variety of groups or to only one group. In many Northern nations the reference is to one, those with disabilities. This is the context of our discussion. The importance of this point will emerge later.

Let us also say that leadership toward inclusion for students with disabilities, again in our view, has been more a characteristic of family-oriented groups than of governments or educators. Families and their advocates are far more aware of the values of inclusion for children and their life in society than are other players in education. This is not to say that some governments and educators have not embraced education and disability. It is to say, however, that leadership by governments and educators has not been as common as among family oriented groups in Canada. In Canada, it has been organizations such as the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education, the Canadian Association of Community Living, the Marsha Forest Centre, and a number of Family Networks that have been at the cutting edge of advocacy and change. They demonstrated early and unwavering leadership in identifying barriers and working to overcome them. It is only recently that Canadian educators have begun to coalesce in professional organizations to promote inclusive education for all learners with disabilities.

The Canadian federal government, under our Constitution, has no jurisdiction over education. Our 13 provinces and territories individually hold jurisdiction. The picture emerging in Canada is one of commitment by some governments and educators to social justice and inclusive education for those with disabilities, and one of other governments and educators "camouflaging" decisions to maintain the special education model, offering pretense in the guise of inclusion. In significant respect, inclusive education is becoming a buzzword in Northern nations, a politically useful term with which to deflect criticism and to continue as one has done before, as far as disability is concerned. This analysis may be decried by some. Nonetheless, we see evidence supporting it across Canada.

Our Perception

A decided barrier to furthering inclusive education for students with disabilities is that the parent voice and the voice of educators and advocates supporting inclusion do not seem to count. Decisions are in the hands of government and senior educational administrators. Many of these do not appear to understand the relationship between education, social justice, disability, and positive change toward inclusion. They are more concerned with not disrupting the system by vigorously mandating inclusion in regular classrooms for learners with disabilities.

Current responses to placement of students with disabilities in community schools are focused on lesser, but still important barriers. Issues of physical access, provision of ramps and elevators, and issues of inaccessible curricula take pride of place. In Northern nations great attention has been paid to these types of barriers and considerable progress has been made. We know from experience in various nations that such barriers can be overcome, not only in the North, but also in many areas of the world. These types of barriers apply whether one is speaking of inclusive education or of the integration options under the traditional special education model. Those working with students with disabilities in regular classrooms face the same practical barriers under both models. However, when it comes to inclusive education and a focus on placement in the regular classroom, a set of barriers that do not apply to the special education model come into play. Indeed, there is little in common between the two models in concept and practice.

This presentation focuses on a set of “foundational” barriers to inclusion for all students with disabilities. The ones we will discuss today are:

- Barriers of educational thought and practice that will take more than changes for physical accessibility or differentiation of instruction. These are ways of thought in the minds of decision-makers that convince them that fundamental change is not possible, nor needed, for all learners with disabilities, and without sufficient value for the expenditure of so much effort.
- Approaches some governments and educators turn to in order to resist fundamental change.
- Belief that there are two classes of learners, one composed of those who learn well and who are accepted without question in regular classrooms, and one composed of those perceived as unable to learn well, second-class learners, those with disabilities. Many of these students are not considered to have the inherent right to education in regular classrooms throughout their school life as that held by all other groups of students.
- The turgid nature of change in thinking and practice at the teacher education level where learning about teaching and disability is still seen as a “specialist”

trade, and not really for future regular classroom teachers or school administrators and

- Lack of engagement with the entire being of a school as it acts to support or not to support inclusion for learners with disabilities. So long as we spend our time and effort creating approaches only for lesser barriers and fail to deal with greater, truly controlling foundational barriers, inclusion for learners with disabilities will remain beyond our grasp. So long as governments and educators value only high levels of academic learning and devalue those whose learning is more modest, and who ignore the value of social learning and development of community for all, inclusion for learners with disabilities will remain beyond our grasp.

The Practice or the Pretense of Inclusion?

The most significant barrier, in our view, to educational inclusion for learners with disabilities in regular class settings is simply that many governments and educators do not really believe that all learners benefit from inclusion. While a few believe that the only proper place for all students is the regular classroom and are committed to inclusive practice, others believe that inclusion for all is an alluring dream, but that some students with disabilities simply have no place in regular classrooms. Here are some excerpts from North American policies for students with disabilities. We have bolded certain parts for emphasis.

- Government of British Columbia, Canada

*Inclusion is the value system, which holds that all students are entitled to equitable access of learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. **The practice of inclusion transcends the idea of physical location, and incorporates basic values that promote participation, friendship and interaction.***

*The principle of “**placement in the most enabling environment**” applies when decisions are made about the extent to which an individual student is placed in a regular classroom, or assigned to an alternative placement.*

- Government of New Jersey, United States

The federal IDEA requirement for placing students in the least restrictive environment has an optional escape clause for those who regard some learners as not fitting into regular classrooms.

*To the **maximum extent appropriate**, students with disabilities are educated with those who are nondisabled. **Special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular classroom occurs only when the nature of the educational disability is such that education in the regular class***

cannot be achieved satisfactorily with the use of supplementary aids and services.

We see these as two examples of what we refer to as “opt out” policies. Opt out policies are based on the belief that a goodly number of students with disabilities are not “true” learners. They cannot learn as do other students in regular classrooms. Therefore, for their own good, they must be denied the right to learn in regular classroom settings, no matter what they or their families wish. They must be segregated for the benefit of their learning and so as not to impede the learning of others. Such government-permitted, opt-out policies invite educators to ignore the general guideline found in many policy statements that the regular classroom is the “setting of first choice for all students”. In theory, it is only after the regular class has been considered that thought may be given to any other placement. In theory, only a very few students, for “extreme reasons” will need alternate placement, and then only for so long as the extreme need continues or cannot be addressed. The actual result of providing an option to the regular classroom is that a significant number of educators readily find the regular classroom an inappropriate choice for many students, and not only those in extreme situations. Human nature tells us that, when choice is present, the tendency is to follow the path of least resistance and continue with past practice. The kindest thing that can be said of the writers of such “escape” clauses is that they are overly optimistic with regard to human nature.

Compare the two examples above with the following.

- Government of Northwest Territories, Canada

Inclusive education is more than a method or strategy. It is a way of life that is tied directly to the belief system that values diversity. Inclusive education is also a philosophical and practical education approach, which strives to respond to individual needs, and is intended to ensure equal access for all students to educational programs in regular classroom settings. Inclusive education is mandatory in the NWT school system.

Some governments and educators, such as in the Northwest Territories of Canada, believe that the philosophy of inclusion, as applied to disability, can be enacted in practice. In these systems all students, despite diverse learning needs and strengths, belong in regular classroom settings with the full range of their peers. There are no second-class students. There is no second choice for placement. There is no belief that, “All does not mean all”.

In Canada the province of New Brunswick and the three northern territories, Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut, are fully committed to the concept of inclusion and disability and to universal access to regular classrooms for all students without exception. The situation across the rest of Canada is not as uniform. As noted, most provinces have opt-out policy clauses for students with disabilities. Not all school systems in provinces with opt-out clauses in their policies appear to be taking advantage of such clauses. Some are realigning policies and practice toward future realization of

inclusion. Realignment in placements in regular classrooms is obvious in revised special education plans such as that of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, though effect on actual placement is yet to be seen. Effect on placement is seen in school systems such as the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board. HWCDSB was the first school system anywhere to include all students with disabilities in regular classrooms (Hansen, Leyden, Bunch, & Pearpoint, 2006). In like manner, individual schools across Canada are exhibiting leadership toward inclusion at the local level.

Do not think that we believe some governments and educators are willfully denying learners with disabilities their rights. Based on their own understanding of what is best for the learner with disabilities, they are offering what they believe best for all concerned. This belief is challenged by the United Nations, its related agencies, and by those educators who work with all students with disabilities as an out-moded understanding. Nevertheless, despite mounting research and findings from practice that inclusion is a stronger academic and social choice than is segregation, some governments and educators are not convinced that inclusion is appropriate for all students with disabilities. To them, exclusion for students who do not fit the accepted mode is the correct approach. As the Director of Canada's largest school system has been known to say with reference to continuing the special education model, "If it isn't broken, there is no need to fix it".

Belief that segregation is beneficial to sizable numbers of learners with disabilities is perhaps the most difficult foundational barrier with which to deal. Yet, educators, whom many around the world admire for their progressive approaches to other areas of rights and social justice, support exclusion when it comes to disability.

Unintended Continued Marginalization

In 1994 UNESCO opened the inclusive education debate with a focus on learners experiencing disabilities. The term "inclusive education", as meaning having access to regular classroom settings, was associated only with learners with disabilities. Those from around the world participating in the Salamanca conference agreed that placement in regular classroom settings is the most beneficial approach for all learners. That students with disabilities were to learn alongside their peers without disabilities was clear to all. It is no longer so clear.

For a great many for many parents, advocates, and educators, particularly in Northern nations such as Canada in which learners with disabilities are the only group denied access to regular classroom settings, this singular group remains the focus of inclusive education. All other groups already have unquestioned access to regular classroom settings. Unquestioned access to the regular classroom is not the case for students with disabilities in Canada. It is a source of dispute.

Recently, the U.N. has "broadened" the groups of students to be encompassed by the term inclusive education. The 2008 UNESCO International Conference on Education defined inclusive education "as an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education

for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics, and learning expectations of the students and communities eliminating all forms of discrimination” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 126). Specifically, as Mitchell (2010) noted, this view broadened the earlier Salamanca focus on disability to include, “consideration of other sources of disadvantage and marginalization, such as gender, poverty, language, ethnicity, and geographic isolation”.

The Canadian Council of Ministers of Education has embraced the “broad” definition. For instance, Ontario’s inclusive education policy covers “recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, students with special educational needs”, and other characteristics placing them at risk (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Thus, governments and educators now may use the term “inclusive education” to refer to the other groups already with unquestioned access to regular classrooms as needing to be included. The argument is that their academic or social progress as a group is troubled compared to that of the dominant group. At the extreme, the broad definition according to some, for instance the Ontario Ministry of Education, takes in the entire population of boys, as their academic progress in some areas is less than that of girls. A possibility resulting from this broadening of the definition of inclusive education is that schools may focus on those other groups already in regular classroom settings under the broad definition of inclusive education, while continuing exclusion for learners with disabilities.

Does this happen? Last year we attended an Ontario Ministry of Education sponsored two-day “Closing the Gaps in Student Achievement” research symposium on inclusive education. School systems from all over the province were invited to send multiple representatives, were provided financial support, and invited to submit presentations. The two days were replete with speakers from school systems presenting on what they were doing to further inclusion. There was not a single presentation, other than one by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, on disability and education. Many of the educators attending the Human Rights presentation were incensed at being told that it was their legal responsibility to include students with disabilities in regular classrooms. They vocally challenged the representative of the Human Rights Commission making the presentation. At the same time, they found no problem strengthening support for other groups of learners already in regular classrooms, but did not extend this willingness to regular classroom placement for those with disabilities. A second example is similar. Earlier this year one of us with another colleague participated in a three-day conference in the province of Saskatchewan on educational issues of importance to Prairie Provinces. Presentations focused on a variety of student groups were made by educators. Other than ours, not one presentation took up the issue of disability.

Our experience is that the broad definition, while very appropriate where a variety of groups are excluded in education, such as in India and Croatia, is proving a barrier to learners with disabilities in Northern nations where only those with disabilities may be denied regular classroom access. We do not believe the intent of the United Nations, when the definition of inclusive education was broadened, was to deflect attention away from learners with disabilities, but this certainly is what is happening in various places.

Governments and educators must act to ensure that learners with disabilities share the rights of all other groups in any nation to placement in regular classroom settings alongside their non-disabled peers.

Over-Reliance on Special Education Teachers and Others

Special Education Teachers and EAs (Educational Assistants) are a boon to education and disability. We do not doubt their devotion to their students. We do believe their role must be to become a team under the general leadership of the regular classroom teacher in achieving inclusion for all. They are an intrinsic aspect of the support needed by students with disabilities for progress in academic and social achievement. Specialist teachers with deep knowledge of the effect disability may have on academic and social progress will continue to be needed to support regular classroom teachers. They are an absolute need if inclusion is to replace exclusion. Inclusion does not mean, as some seem to think, leaving the students to flounder without the support of specialist assistance. Such an argument is just one more attempt to resist change for those with disabilities by misrepresenting the meaning of inclusive education.

However, change is exactly what is needed if inclusion is to be achieved. Ideas change. Knowledge changes. Roles change. The roles of the average classroom teacher, the Special Education Teacher and the EA must change because inclusion requires that we think differently and that we do things differently to achieve the most powerful education for all.

School systems are encountering difficulty, first in realizing this and then in addressing the need to re-order their thinking. They all initially encounter difficulty in balancing the roles of the regular teacher, the Special Education Teacher, and the EA as pressure for change builds. Change engenders challenge. We all know that from our own life experiences. One way to meet and defeat challenge is for all to work as a team with the same goal in mind.

Does imbalance among those supporting students with disabilities occur? The following are comments from Malta, a nation with a long-term policy of inclusion. The first is from two of the educational leaders in Malta, Paul Bartolo and George Borg, who were instrumental in establishing inclusive education, including a strong Learning Support Assistant (LSA) program.

Great difficulties are also created when there is conflict between the teacher and the LSA (Learning Support Assistant).... "There still are many instances where the conflict remains and even if it is not overtly shown, results in lack of collaboration whereby the teacher relegates the LSA and child to a corner of the classroom, or indeed for long periods outside the classroom, and there is no real inclusion of the child in the class's activities (Bartolo and Borg, 2009).

The second is from the research of a recent M. Ed. graduate of the University of Malta. "During the various observations the author could identify instances where the

LSA acted as a barrier rather than an aid to social inclusion. Academically, the author observed that a good number of the class teachers relied solely on the LSA's to provide for the teaching and learning of the students “ (Caruna, 2011). It takes time and constant monitoring to create change such as inclusive education, even in a nation with firm commitment and strong leadership.

Many school systems following the special education model admit students with disabilities to regular classrooms. In most cases the students do not become true members of the classroom community in the same manner as other students. There are a number of barriers, such as those noted by Bartoli, Borg and Caruana, which, if not overcome, block inclusion. What occurs is more in keeping with the integration options of the special education model than of the inclusive education model. Students with disabilities somehow get pushed to the fringes of classroom society.

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We recommend that governments, school administrators, and teachers keep in mind that the special education model is a deficit-based model. Perceived deficits control educational placement. We do not believe a deficit-based model should guide any educational practices. Inclusion is an equity-based model under which the abilities possessed by all students are the most important factors.

Complicating the situation is that the teacher in control of their programs often is not the regular classroom teacher. The team of Special Education Teacher and EA plan and carry out the bulk of the student's program with little substantial input from the classroom teacher. Input and assistance from the Special Education Teacher and EA is invaluable. However, taking the approach of putting them in charge while reducing regular classroom teacher input creates distance between the regular teacher and students with disabilities and between these and their peers. Care must be taken to maintain a balance of responsibility that results in inclusion rather than a version of special education. Inclusion remains merely a nice idea, if the regular classroom teacher is relegated to the status of a minor player.

We are convinced that regular classroom teachers are the keystones to inclusion. They lay the foundation of social justice and equity in the classroom. They are the day in and day out models for all students in the class. They set out standards of belief and behaviour, set the tone of the classroom, and create the classroom culture. If they do not interact routinely with students with disabilities with respect and expectations of progress, the other students will imitate their model and the student with disabilities will be shunned. If administrators and teachers allow others to set academic and social expectations for students with disabilities, there will be two sets of standards in the

classroom. If ordinary teachers do not take leadership for including every student, there is no leadership toward inclusion.

If regular teachers leave a leadership void in the case of students with disabilities, the Special Education Teacher and/or the EA will assume primary responsibility for teaching the students with disabilities. That is what good professionals do. The downside is that students with disabilities always will be relegated to the fringes of the classroom community as Special Education Teachers and EA's do not set the culture of the regular classroom. The only person who can set the classroom culture is the regular classroom teacher. Absence of a positive classroom atmosphere for students with disabilities is a real and present danger in many schools.

Not Preparing the Regular Classroom Teacher

An unfortunate aspect lending support to the perception that many regular classroom teachers look to Special Education Teachers or EA's is that the regular teachers do not believe themselves professionally prepared to accept responsibility for students with disabilities. A national study by Bunch, Lupart, and Brown (1997) found that Canadian educators considered themselves inadequately prepared professionally for the task of inclusion. They cited lack of preparation in their Faculties of Education and lack of sound professional in-service at the school system level. This finding has been echoed more recently by others. Conderman et al. (2005) concluded that *"teacher education programs lack an organized approach linking courses and field experiences within a conceptual framework resulting in incongruence in definition, purpose and goals for the (inclusive) teaching experience"*. Olson (2003) of the Graduate School, University of Wisconsin Stout, USA, questioned inclusion in that *"a significantly high number of teachers (81.9 %)" in her study of teacher attitudes toward inclusion "reported that full inclusion in class would not effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities. Most teachers strongly or somewhat (on a 5 point scale) agree that a continuum of services needs to be provided outside the general education classroom"*, and that *"of the teachers surveyed only 50 % somewhat agreed that general education teachers have the skills to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classroom."* In other words, their teacher preparation programs convince future teachers that the special education model is superior to the inclusive education model and that their skills do not match the need.

If general classroom teachers feel unprepared, they will readily welcome others who seem to know what to do. This may relieve regular teacher anxiety, but it serves only to strengthen the barrier between regular teacher and student and to move the student to the fringes of the classroom society. This approach is common in Canada and the United States. In Canada, it seems that when Faculties of Education graduate teachers, most perceive themselves as unprepared for inclusion. We interact with new teachers from various Canadian Faculties on a routine basis. We know from first-hand experience that they look to others to work with their students with disabilities. Faculties may believe that they are preparing future teachers for diversity. We know from speaking with many graduating teachers that they do not share this belief.

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A Whole School Vision of Inclusion

Most students are members of the school-wide community of their elementary or secondary school. There are two major elements to the whole school community. One is the academic element. Students are members of the school community through routine interaction with regular classroom teachers and being perceived as active learners with expectations of progress on a shared curriculum that recognizes the diversity of contribution to knowledge of all peoples.

The second element is school life beyond the classroom. This can be of equal or greater importance to students, and not only those with disabilities, than of the academic element. There are many aspects to school life beyond the regular classroom, all of which serve to bond students to school life. This bonding grows from recognition of various student groups as unique, but also as part of the full school community. Students engage in whole-school co-curricular activities, clubs, teams, events, dances, etc. of their choice along with students of similar interests. There is school-wide group and individual recognition through such aspects in Canada as certain religious holidays, relevant library holdings, Black History Month activities, wearing of cultural dress, special events, and such simple things as sitting with friends anywhere you want in the school cafeteria, and being recognized by a "Hi" or a wave in the hallways. The social community of the school encompasses the full diversity of interests, backgrounds, and preferences of students.

Only one group has sharply, non-voluntary, limited involvement in the academic and social life of the school. This is the group of students with disabilities. Many of the students do not have routine interactions with the classroom teacher. Often their

academic program primarily is the responsibility of a Special Education Teacher. In like manner, an EA often monitors and delivers the program. In many instances the program of study differs from that of the majority of students. Interaction with the general school community is limited by school belief and infrastructure. In too many instances, interaction is almost non-existent. There are few signs of positive group recognition. What recognition there is, tends to be of a giver-receiver, charitable nature, clearly marking out the student with disabilities as a second-class member of the school community. This all adds up to a tremendous foundational barrier to recognition and acceptance.

The school intent on being inclusive will develop a whole school vision. With administrators and teachers finding ways to move students with disabilities from the fringes of community and to greater participation in school life. The regular classroom teacher, supported by a Special Education Teacher and an EA as appropriate, will be an important person in the individual's school life. Instruction will be based on an accessible form of the standard curriculum. Days such as International Day of Persons with Disabilities will be recognized. Every effort will be made to ensure participation in co-curricular activities. Library holdings matching the nature of holdings for other groups will be available. Students with disabilities will have a presence in their schools. The vision begins in regular classrooms with secure membership for all. It extends from the classrooms throughout the school.

A progressive school will think and act at the whole school level for every individual student and every group of students. This is a foundational objective completely in the control of the administration and teaching staff of any school. There is need to draw students with disabilities from the fringes of school life and into the fullness of the school community. Working toward anything less will never result in inclusion for all. This is not a dream. Many schools are making it a reality for all students every day.

Concluding Thoughts

Bringing students with disabilities fully into education has been a slow process lasting many years. Bunch (1997) noted in his *From Here to There: The Passage to Inclusive Education* that the change has been glacial but constant. For most of its history special education was based on provision of education in segregated special schools. Beginning in the mid-19th century special classes in community schools were introduced. In the late 1960's the Special Education Cascade Model developed with integration in regular classrooms as an option. As noted earlier, integration has significant drawbacks, but it began the move from special schools and special classes some students with disabilities closer to their non-disabled peers.

With startling rapidity for education the concept and practice of inclusive education as a stronger response to student rights and equity for students with disabilities was introduced into some schools. This change has challenged governments, educational administrators, teacher educators, teachers, and families to lead in change. Inclusion calls for the basic understanding that the role of students with disabilities in the education

system needs to be reformed. Once this understanding is accepted, valid change can begin. However, a second understanding is necessary. While one's personal understanding that the system needs to be reformed may arrive as an event. Changing a system is a process. It will take time.

As noted in this paper, governments and educators have responded variously to need for reform. A number have responded by embracing the concept of inclusion and finding ways to include all students as full members of regular classrooms, while still working on developing a whole school vision. They are building strong foundations for inclusion. Others, however, are struggling to accept that, as Marsha Forest, one of the earliest leaders in inclusive education, said, "All means all". They are daunted by the barriers they perceive to inclusion for all.

While these barriers to inclusion have taken various forms and are of varying magnitude, we suggest that inclusive education will not succeed until those of the greatest magnitude are overcome. It is not the practical barriers involving such aspects as physical access to schools, development of differentiated instruction and accessible curricula, and the ability of teachers to teach inclusively, or of acceptance by peers that withhold changes to inclusion. That these practical barriers can be overcome has been proven by many schools. They continue in many places, but we know that they are not the most significant barriers. We know how to surmount them.

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The critical barriers to inclusive education for students with disabilities in Canada are those of:

- Accepting that persons with disabilities have the right to education in regular classrooms.
- Accepting that their learning, even if modest, is worthy.
- A lack of leadership by some governments in setting out legislation containing no opt-out clause.
- The tardiness of Faculties of Education in moving to prepare future regular class teachers for a leadership role in inclusive education.

And the failure of schools to re-think their school communities to maximize the participation of students with disabilities in those communities in keeping with concepts of equity and rights. And the failure of schools to re-think their school communities to

maximize the participation of students with disabilities in those communities in keeping with concepts of equity and rights.

Foundational barriers must be recognized as such by governments and educators. They must be addressed seriously with the future objective of inclusive education for students with disabilities in mind. We all must understand that it is in the school years that the foundations for a just society are passed to every citizen. Society cannot miss the opportunity that schools provide to strengthen social justice and equity for all, even those with disabilities.

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