

WORLD-WIDE CHANGE TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

I recently attended an international conference focused on inclusive education, educating learners experiencing disabilities with their typical peers in regular classrooms of community schools. The conference was held in Salamanca, Spain and was in recognition of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994. The Salamanca Statement was the first strong, international call for movement away from the special education model and segregation to preference for all learners to be educated in the same classrooms of typical schools.

The conference was an amazing experience. Participants came from over 60 nations. Every continent was represented. A number of Ministers of Education and United Nations level officials were there. Parents, teachers, professors, advocates, persons experiencing disabilities, young people, older people, government officials, and people speaking a multitude of languages all were there.

We sat together, thought together, examined barriers to inclusion together, considered needs and solutions together, argued together, and laughed together. The wonderful part was that it was a meeting of about 400 people, all of whom were positive regarding inclusion, but realistic regarding the effort and the time it will take for substantial change to inclusion to occur. Education systems are more known for their resistance to change than for innovation when it comes to learners experiencing disabilities is an enormous task.

Is change happening? Yes and no.

I sat with two women from Libya who described that country's plans to spread inclusive education within its borders. They described a well-ordered, well-conceptualized, ambitious series of moves over time. Their objective is to begin small with a limited number of schools, but to progressively build out from that base. By 2013, they aim to have a significant number of schools working inclusively, to have provided professional development to a large number of teachers, and to have a support system for schools and teachers.

My friend and colleague, Rima Al-salah of Mississauga, Ontario has been invited to travel to Libya to present a workshop on inclusion and autism in support of that nation's plans for positive change. It is interesting that, while other nations recognize the leaders we have in our midst, sometimes little recognition is apparent in Canada. That is one reason why a number of us, including Rima, have begun the Canadian Association of Inclusive Educators (CAIE). We need to be more active in advocating and supporting change to inclusion for all. If you wish information on CAIE, check caie.info. Let teachers and other educators in your communities know about it.

While in Salamanca, I also I listened to young people from South America, Africa, and Europe speak of their experiences with segregation, and of their vision for

inclusion. They dedicated themselves to rejection of a paternalistic and limiting education system and to personal activism in favour of inclusion. One person in particular, Mia, a young woman from Lebanon, who happens to have Down Syndrome as part of her being, spoke forcefully of her passion for inclusion. Mia, her mother, other friends, and I spent considerable time together discussing the progress in Lebanon.

These people from Libya and Lebanon are at the very beginning of movement to inclusion. They are representative of many others at the conference, planning for the future and new opportunities for all learners. Realistically, they have far to go in order to achieve their goals. However, they also have the determination, belief in human rights, and the value of all children of a community to interacting with each other.

I discussed with Canadian advocates and educators their personal and professional leadership in making Canadian schools inclusive. They are familiar with the strong progress in some parts of our nation and the strong resistance in other parts. The inclusive policies of New Brunswick and our three northern territories and of an increasing number of individual school systems are examples well known in other countries.

However, most Canadian jurisdictions continue to support the special education model for “those learners who are unable to benefit from education with their typical peers”. In my view, if the eventual objective is inclusion, it is an error to continue to have two paths for education and disability in education policy. I would suggest that inclusion should be the common objective. If there are some students whose needs and abilities mean that an inclusive program cannot be worked out easily, the planning for these students is an exception and not, and should not be considered as an alternate path for an entire group of students. If there is a readily available, approved alternate choice, too many will turn to it instead of really working on inclusion for all.

Additionally, some jurisdictions and school systems use the term “inclusion” for educational placement choices that are part of the special education model. They seem to think that inclusion is just another option under the special education model. It is not simply another option. It is the only option based on acceptance and human rights in education for all. It is challenging to move people to understanding of what human rights and social justice in education mean for learners experiencing disabilities and their families. Education is a conservative profession. The majority of people who are responsible for education are more known for their conservatism than for flexibility and innovation. They must be supported in realizing that inclusion is a new and stronger way to look at all learners in order to develop a socially just education society.

We in Canada need to renew and stiffen our resolve to move inclusive education forward. We know from our experience that inclusion is possible and its results positive. Now we need to persuade our governments and school systems that inclusion is here to stay, and that they must shake off educational conservatism and move with other nations into the future.

We have the knowledge to support positive change in Canada. New Brunswick and our three northern territories have policies of inclusion and have invested in inclusive practice. Another recognition of Canadian expertise in inclusive education comes from England. Jackie Bajus and Les Galambos, both of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB) are on a speaking tour in England as I write this blog.. They were invited by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education in Bristol. They will discuss how HWCDSB became the first entire school system in North America, and perhaps in the world, to move to inclusion.

It is heartening that this week, on the International Day for Persons with Disabilities, the Canadian federal government announced that it is moving to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Canada will catch up to a number of other nations that have ratified the Convention. Hopefully the message will get to all provincial governments and to all of our school systems.

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