

MAKING THE MARK PROJECT
Disability & Inclusive Education: Moving Rhetoric to Reality

CONTEXT

Being “an outsider looking in” means isolation and loneliness for the person on the outside. This tragically descriptive phrase came from one of our friends. Jenn is a young woman who happens to have a disability. She was speaking of her experience as a special education student during her elementary and secondary schools days. There were days, months, and years of lack of friendships at school and of low expectations from her teachers. Another friend, Crystal, described her school life as “present, but not participating”. Having put her secondary school experience behind her, Crystal is now trying to make up for the education she missed.

Jenn and Crystal are two of literally tens of thousands of Canadian learners experiencing disabilities consigned to loneliness and under-education in the school system. Lack of acceptance socially and deprecation of their skills educationally have effected their self-image, their confidence, and their very being. They are far from alone in this experience.

Though other aspects of society contribute to social exclusion of those experiencing disabilities, when it comes to whether one becomes part of the larger community or consigned to its margins, it is the school system that lays the foundation. The school system, rather than being a model of acceptance and social inclusion and positive expectations for learners experiencing disabilities, models social exclusion and low expectations through its dependency on the special education model. The result is social exclusion and marginalization from the earliest years and life-long isolation and under-achievement for too many. If your friendship circle is circumscribed from the

Need

beginning, it is not likely to blossom in later years when the demands of society “to fit in” increase. If you are not expected to perform well in school from your first day in the classroom, you will never achieve your potential. Teacher expectation effect is powerful.

The school system is the bedrock, second only to the family, on which rest acceptance and respect for all in our society. Setting learners experiencing disabilities on the fringes of our education society in their early years positions them for a life of isolation and dependency.

THE CHALLENGE

Canada has one of the most sophisticated public education systems in the world. It has been recognized for its attention to issues of difference. Few would argue with these statements, except when it comes to the education of persons experiencing disabilities. Our education system, when it comes to disability, is out-moded by the standards of the United Nations and its various bodies, as well as by those of an increasing number of nations. This is the case even though inclusive education is a much stronger, more socially just model and is spreading around the world.

Canadian education systems have been more than reluctant to change from the out-moded special education model to one more contemporary and socially just. Only a few Canadian jurisdictions, with approximately 7 % of Canada’s school population, have announced and implemented policies of inclusive education in the area of disability. Other jurisdictions have created policies based on inclusion as a value system, a philosophy, or an attitudinal set, while leaving loopholes permitting school systems to continue with segregated practice. That is, the rhetoric of inclusion does not necessarily signal the practice of all students being included in the regular classrooms of community

Challenge

schools. The end result is that the great percentage of learners experiencing disabilities continues to run the risk of being sidelined in the education system. Too many are fully or partially segregated in special classes or schools.

Examples:

- In British Columbia inclusion does not mandate regular classroom placement. It is regarded as a value system that can be realized in a variety of more segregated settings. Inclusive education does not mandate regular classroom placement.
- In Ontario the Toronto District School Board, operating under a provincial policy of inclusive education, recently announced that its vision for the future of education for learners experiencing disabilities. The Board's vision is to continue with the special education model.
- The Canadian federal government recently ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a Convention calling for inclusive education as a right. In response to written requests for initiation of a conversation on the implication of the Convention for inclusive education in Canada, the responsible office declined to meet with us citing lack of jurisdiction.

It is obvious from the above that in Canada the surface appearance is one of inclusive education and social inclusion. The reality is that most learners experiencing disabilities are educated in jurisdictions claiming to be inclusive while continuing to make provision for segregation of learners experiencing disabilities. Achieving social inclusion and reaching potential levels of academic achievement are unlikely to result from educational systems that model social exclusion and low expectations. Likewise, lack of federal

Levels
of
Challenge
Barriers

commitment to enter into conversation on what its role might be signals lack of willingness to take up the challenge of change to inclusion.

The above outlines a major part of the challenge to education and disability in Canada. Most provincial Ministries of Education have paid lip service to inclusion, while leaving the door open to segregation. Given leadership making inclusion an option, it is no wonder that school systems continue to support segregation for learners perceived as “not fitting in”.

The other part of the challenge is that governments, school systems and Faculties of Education appear unaware in their decisions of the building evidence from research and from jurisdictions practicing inclusion that it works. Not only does it work, inclusion in education has been declared a right at the UN level, and this right has been recognized by Canada. If one adds to this that Canadian society in general also seems uninformed of the academic and social benefits of inclusion, a picture emerges of a nation largely ignorant of the values of inclusion and of the social justice arguments for its implementation in schools.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Making the Mark Project is significant and complex as reflected in the two overall project objectives.

- The first is to conduct a multi-faceted awareness campaign to inform Canadian society at large of the benefits of inclusive education and of the social justice of moving to inclusion for all learners experiencing disabilities.
- The second is to develop and provide research and evidence-based information to government, school systems, university educators, and other educational decision-

Overall
Objectives

makers to support movement to inclusive education at the elementary and secondary levels.

These objectives are ambitious but attainable given sufficient expertise, sufficient time, and sufficient funding.

Expertise

The project will be led by the Marsha Forest Centre, a Canadian NGO recognized internationally for its innovative Person-Centered Planning and other strategies, delivery systems, innovative consultative services, and supportive print and visual resources in inclusion, the Canadian Abilities Foundation, a recognized national leader in informing Canadian society of issues, contributions, and possibilities of Canadians experiencing disabilities through a range of integrated visual, print, technological and consultative services, and the recently formed Canadian Association of Inclusive Educators . **caie** is led by experienced educators from the university, elementary, and secondary levels with firm connections across the Canadian teaching profession.

These project leaders will be supported by carefully chosen consultants across the range of activities of the project.

Funding

Conceptual design of the project in its entirety requires vision, wide-ranging familiarity with social inclusion and, specifically, inclusive education and the Canadian school system, as well as various methods of bringing a major issue to Canadian attention.

Ensuring sufficient funding for the project will be a fundamental task. Costing project personnel, development and dissemination activities, accounting systems,

The
Team

The
Missing
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infrastructure needs, consultant support, and community input is a task calling for expertise.

The planning phase of the project will begin with acquisition of modest but sufficient seed funding to support detailed development of a complex proposal laying out and costing the total project.

Phase two will focus on meeting with appropriate funders having the vision to appreciate need for a project that will work to make inclusive education and social inclusion for learners experiencing disabilities an outstanding and sustainable characteristic of Canadian education.

THE PROJECT

Our project is focused on altering societal images of Canadians experiencing disabilities through multiple levels of action. This group historically consistently has been faced with the greatest degree of marginalization of any group. This continues to be the reality of the lives of persons experiencing disabilities, though a measure of change has been achieved. Unfortunately, the quality of that change has been more toward pity and charity than rights and equity. This approach emphasizes perceived lack of ability and dependency and results in granting of inequitable second-class citizenship at the best.

In our analysis the roots of discrimination are seeded in the earliest years of life. Children first learn their understanding of difference from their parents. Next they learn from the education system, which is second only to the parents in forming our Weltanschung, world vision. It is in the education system that we begin to understand how others in our community view difference. The powerful "others" during the

Method
of
Transformational
Change

approximately 14 years all students spend in school are their teachers, who teach the values and mores of our society.

Despite the best of intentions, the Canadian education system teaches that learners with disabilities are so different that they must be served by a parallel education system composed of special schools, special classes, and various other modes of physical and social distancing, in other words, the special education model which is based on a series of descending steps from regular classroom placement to placement outside the education system, all determined by perceived lower and lower levels of ability. Even when a student with disability is placed in a regular classroom, it is understood that under the special education model transfer to another and more segregated setting may occur at any time. Such a process becomes part of what typical students understand and determines how the majority will respond to disability throughout their lifetimes.

Our project will bring awareness of the injustice of this situation and the benefits of inclusive education to the Canadian public. One message will be that difference is a reason to be included. As noted earlier, there are stirrings of inclusive education in Canada. The values are being recognized by some, though most jurisdictions remain with the deficit based special education model.

We will focus on inclusive education, a model based on rights; equity, and social justice, to achieve transformative change. Inclusive education has been proven through research and experience to result in higher levels of social and academic achievement. We know that change is possible. We will take knowledge of the benefits of inclusion for all learners to the Canadian public through various initiatives. Broader understanding will further acknowledgement for the need for positive change. Simultaneously, we will

support school systems in strengthening their infrastructures around students with disabilities, as they have for other groups of students at risk. We also will provide them with research evidence of the benefits of inclusive education, the quality of Canadian teacher professional preparation for inclusion, effect of inclusion on student friendship status, and inclusive education as a determinant of student health reaching from childhood to adulthood. As these strategies proceed, a shift to social inclusion, higher achievement levels, and understanding by all will occur. Inclusive education will become a sustainable dynamic in schools. We know this can happen because we know it has happened in parts of Canada and elsewhere. In fact, we have helped it to happen in Canada and in other nations.

The process leading to sustainable transformational change is necessarily complex. A major requirement will be working at the multiple levels of students experiencing disabilities, their typical peers, parents, future teachers, practicing teachers, parents, educational administrators, and members of the general community. Working with these varied groups and keeping them informed of the progress of the Making the Mark Project and the resilience of the players, adds to the complexity of the project. We intend to approach a social/organizational shift in education from a base of group inability to one of individual levels of ability. We will focus on society and schooling as dynamic systems with the capacity to learn new lessons and to move from an out-moded model from a now deficient past to explore, test, and engage new formulations based on social inclusion, maximization of personal potential, and societal cohesion.

The following lays out the multiple levels of action and sub-activities under each to engender understanding of the potential contributions of the Making the Mark Project,

together with the complexity and audacity of its conceptualization. The primary areas of project activity are indicated through a cover statement of purpose and then a series of sub-activities designed to achieve that purpose. Each statement and associated sub-activities serve as the warp and weave of the full project design.

To inform Canadian society of the contribution of inclusive education:

- Description of benefits
- Description of quality of life effect
- Attainment of a sense of belonging
- Attainment of new images to replace old
- Emphasis on healing society through education
- Considering the whole person
- Realization of rights and equity

To involve a wide range of Canadians in the project:

- Participation as central to change
- Developing the concept of contributing citizens
- Holding conversations with student leaders in schools
- Holding conversations with community groups
- Developing networks for ideas and feedback
- Inviting parents as partners
- Inviting participation of allied groups

Impacting the Life Span:

- Preparing for the series of transitions common to life
- Understanding the contribution of inclusion at the elementary level

The
Strategies
in Detail

- Understanding the contribution of inclusion at the secondary level
- Understanding the contribution at the young adult level and beyond
- Understanding the contribution to employment
- Understanding the contribution to community involvement

Vision as a Guide to Change”

- Thinking of possibilities, not problems
- The nation, step by step
- Full citizenship despite challenge
- Finding the tipping point of change
- Changing the nature of the conversation
- Choices
- Altered understandings

Informing and Working with Schools for Change:

- Developing guides to embedding inclusion in schools
- Understanding the formal and informal infrastructures of school
- Understanding the value of school/community cooperation
- Understanding accessibility as more than just physical structures
- Extending teacher readiness for inclusive change
- Extending administrator leadership skills for change
- Involving students in leading positive change
- Finding ways for school self-evaluation

Public Conversations to Share and Move Forward

- Teacher and student evaluation and trouble-shooting meetings

- Being familiar with what other schools have done
- Youth forums to share ideas
- Involving parents and the family voice
- Working together to develop new options
- Understanding community views of schooling

Employing the Media in Change

- Facebook for communication of messages
- Statements by well-known Canadians
- Press releases
- Twitter as a communication channel
- Bill board advertising of change
- Sharing stories of change
- Listening to stories of those beyond school
- TV and radio spots
- Projecting positive images of ability to change understanding