



SOCIAL INCLUSION, DISABILITY & SCHOOL

A sense of belonging in our society is something we all want – and need. We want to be surrounded by those who love us, by friends and by the members of our larger community. As noted on the McConnell Family Foundation website, “Social inclusion lies at the heart of what it is to be a citizen. It is not simply to be accepted, but to be appreciated for the qualities, skills and values each person possesses. It is to be fully a citizen with rights and obligations”.

Unfortunately, many Canadians do not have a sense of belonging in the society beyond the family. The reasons are varied and their effect devastating to the individual person and to the group. Perhaps the most socially excluded are those experiencing disabilities. David Pitonyak commented on this reality in his January 2010 paper, “The Importance of Belonging”. He emphasized that a great many people with disabilities experience extreme loneliness and isolation. Large numbers depend almost entirely on their families for companionship. The school system, rather than being a model of social inclusion, models social exclusion through its dependency on the special education model with its segregated special classes and special schools. The result of social exclusion from the earliest years in school is life-long isolation in society for too many. If your friendship circle is circumscribed from the beginning, it is not likely to blossom in later years when the demands of society “to fit in” increase. 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 the education society in their early years positions them for life.

On the other hand, connections have been made between inclusive education and health of persons experiencing disabilities. Halton, Kandyce, and Russ (2010) have remarked on the “explosion” of interest around the concept of social capital, valued resources that lie within and are by-products of social relationships. They go on to note that “Social relationships also impact health and are included in social determinants frameworks through constructions such as social cohesion, social support and social exclusion. In any comparison of the special education and inclusive education models, two differences stand out. Social cohesion and the development of social support networks is connected to education in community schools and interaction with typical peers, whereas special education is characterized by being distanced from the typical peer group. The outcome is little opportunity to develop social capital unless one is among one’s typical peers.

Russia

Underwood (2004) of Ryerson University in outlining a case for inclusive education as a determinant of health states:

The benefits of inclusion evident in the educational research are improved teaching, and better academic, social and behavioural outcomes. These benefits logically provide other benefits outside of school. These include access to better jobs, and thus income and food security and reduced poverty, as well as access to social networks through school and work and thus better housing, reduced risk of violence and increased access to health care.

This beneficial domino effect of inclusive education has been recognized by the United Nations (2006, 1994) in its calls for inclusion of learners experiencing disabilities alongside their typical peers in community schools. Even before this, in 1989, at a

Toronto meeting convened by the Marsha Forest Centre, a group sat down to consider how to find a stronger social response compared to the special education model to meet the academic and social needs of this group of learners. By the end of the evening, the term “inclusion” had been introduced and agreed on as a way to signal, with particular reference to the role of education, an equitable position in society for all. The concept of “inclusive education” now has spread around the globe. Though some use the term rhetorically as a theoretical or attitudinal concept not calling for regular classroom placement for all, others have proven that practice can follow theory and society can change when limitations in service approaches are uncovered. International research increasingly is documenting that education under the special education model not only causes social isolation, but also does not result in the levels of academic achievement possible through inclusive experience. Change to inclusive education is a growing dynamic in many nations. Unfortunately, not nearly all governments and educators are willing to change from past practices.

The Canadian Situation

All Canadian educational jurisdictions have declared seeming policies of inclusive education for learners experiencing disabilities. A limited number of jurisdictions covering a low percentage of students experiencing disabilities have buttressed their policies of inclusion with the practice of inclusion. Other jurisdictions, however, have created loopholes permitting school systems leeway to continue with segregated practice. The end result is that, whereas the rhetoric of inclusive education is nationwide, the great percentage of learners experiencing disabilities continues to be educated under the special education model. This model, of course, is based on the belief

that many learners experiencing disabilities learn best when segregated from their non-disabled peers. Various provincial policies, as noted, allow exceptions to regular classroom placement for learners experiencing disabilities with the argument that this is ‘for their own benefit’. This is a policy of selective social isolation based on the questionable argument that segregation is beneficial.

Other jurisdictions that believe inclusive policy and inclusive practice for all are one and the same thing and have pioneered inclusive education practice in the interests of social justice. Among these Canadian pioneers in educational equity are New Brunswick and our three northern territories. Other Canadian jurisdictions use the terms “inclusive, inclusion” and “inclusionary” to describe services that continue to segregate learners. They wrap the practice of social and academic segregation in the cloak of inclusion.

For instance:

- British Columbia has declared a policy of inclusive education. The policy states that inclusion does not mandate a place, but is a service which may be delivered in a variety of settings outside the regular classroom. Within this reasoning segregated education settings are deemed to meet students’ needs and are considered inclusive. Specifically, many students experiencing disabilities are considered as unable to benefit from education in the company of their typical peers, and are segregated on this basis.
- Ontario follows a 1994 policy which states that the regular classroom is the placement of first choice for all learners. However, the province tempers that statement by making provision for segregated settings if, in the view of the school system, segregated placement will better meet the needs of students experiencing

disabilities. In a February, 2011 conference Barbara Hall, Chief Commissioner for the Ontario Human Rights Commission bluntly told assembled Ontario educators that, “We know students with intellectual concerns achieve better academically and socially in regular classrooms than in segregated settings, and Ontario School Boards continue to place them in special classes”. This statement is strongly supported by the international research literature. In other words, many Ontario educators prefer segregation in the face of evidence that inclusion is educationally superior. Once again, learners experiencing disabilities are the last called to the table.

- Saskatchewan, also, has declared a policy of inclusive education. Under this policy, inclusion is an attitude. As such it does not imply placement in a regular classroom. A variety of settings, ranging from the regular classroom to a completely segregated setting can be considered inclusive. Thus, the doors to segregated classrooms remain open for learners experiencing disabilities.

In these and other Canadian jurisdictions being inclusive does not mandate regular classroom placement. A student experiencing disability may never be educated in the company of her/his typical peers. Though they might share the same school building, they, in one way or another, are not a true part of the larger student group. One of our friends experiencing disabilities described this a “being present, but not participating.” Segregated experience from elementary through secondary school is considered to meet the learner’s needs and, therefore, is inclusive.

The result of governments having policy and legislation that use the term “inclusive education” in rhetorical manner may be found in a recent Toronto Board of

Education announcement of its view of the future of education for learners experiencing disabilities. In late 2010 the Board announced that it would continue with its special education structures as this was the strongest answer to educational needs and also provided choice for families. One of the members of our group was invited to the meeting at which this vision was promulgated. He kept count of the number of times the terms “inclusion, inclusive”, or “inclusivity” were used by a school system firmly on the side of continued segregation. The total was 153.

It is obvious from the above that in the Canadian situation the surface appearance is that inclusion, and resultant social inclusion, are being embraced. When one peeks under the surface, it is apparent that most Canadian learners experiencing disabilities are educated in jurisdictions that claim to be inclusive while continuing to maintain the special education model with its full range of partially or completely segregated settings. Social inclusion and possible levels of academic achievement are unlikely to result from educational systems that model social exclusion from ages 4 to 21. After all, this age range is referred to by educators as “the formative years”

The Problem and the Challenge

The essential question is, “What are we forming in the minds of typical students, students experiencing disabilities, teachers, and members of the larger community in terms of education and disability?”

Related questions are:

- What understanding of persons experiencing disabilities, their value, and their rights do we wish our society to hold?

- How can we work with educators, governments, other interested groups, and the large community to foster this understanding?

Our basic position, and the only one acceptable, is that we wish all Canadians, irrespective of difference, “to be appreciated for the qualities, skills and values each possesses and to be fully a citizen with rights and obligations.” We are convinced that national change to education of all learners in the regular classes of community schools is the path to follow. The Canadian education system has the capacity to act as a fulcrum for positive change.

A Team Approach

Having laid out the present situation in Canada and argued for national change to inclusive education, we wish to make it clear that it is not unusual that many Canadian educators are hesitant to move forward. They are familiar with the special education model and believe it to do its job. It does do that. However, it is not doing the job that we now know can be done better through the inclusive education model. That inclusive education is a more powerful strategy for both social and academic achievement of learners experiencing disabilities has been proven in New Brunswick and our northern territories, and in a number of progressive school systems in other jurisdictions. However, change creates concern and hesitancy. What is needed is stronger understanding of the contributions of inclusive education, positive leadership, stronger teacher preparation, positive provincial policies and practice, and well-conceptualized plans for change.

We see need for a team approach to plan and carry out change. An important part of both planning and change must be to retain the values brought to education and

disability by special education teachers. They have the deepest professional preparation and experience in the field and their skills are needed. Administrators must learn how to lead planning for change and how to implement it. Parents must be an integral part of change. They are the first teachers of their children and know them in ways valuable to educators. Educational assistants and other supportive personnel are an important factor in education and must be part of the team.

This teaming is at the heart of what we propose. We are not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The most essential change needed is from segregation to a regular classroom focus by all. The personnel needed for special education are needed for inclusive education. The skills needed are the skills that still will be needed and strengthened. It is not a question of special education being a bad choice. It is a question of what has been a workable approach being supplanted by a stronger approach that is more student-centered and more effective in supporting social inclusion as well as higher academic success.

Making the Mark

The logical instrument of change to social inclusion for all is the educational system. Education is the single agent of society with the responsibility of taking in every Canadian child at an early age and, by law, keeping them until they are young adults with the mandate of educating them about Canadian values, mores, and a firm understanding of equitable society.

We do not consider the above an easy objective to reach. We also believe, on the basis of current evidence, that if we wait for the education system to take action as a

leader of equitable change for Canadians experiencing disabilities, we will wait far longer than is warranted.

Canadian society must be awakened to the need to make its mark on this deep-rooted problem. The challenge is that at present the ordinary Canadian is accustomed to the special education approach and unaware that a more socially and academically powerful model is available. A common belief is that school systems are doing the best they can. The education system, generally, is taking the route of appearing to espouse inclusion while maintaining the practice of segregation for this vulnerable group of learners.

We propose a multifaceted, multi-partner program over a minimum of 5 years to bring the meaning and value of social inclusion for learners experiencing disabilities to the attention of the Canadian public.

The Essence of Our Proposal

Objectives:

- To bring the situation of social isolation and less than possible academic practice for many citizens experiencing disabilities to the attention of the Canadian people.
- To raise consciousness that change is needed and just, and can be facilitated by genuine change to inclusive education.
- To make the point that the educational system is the logical agent of nation-wide change.
- To support educators and families in realizing Canada's capacity for change.
- To incorporate sustainability, resiliency, and innovation into the project. We do not propose a short-term project or short-term change.

Value Base:

- We all have needs and abilities. In that way all Canadian learners are similar.
- Disability is not a reason for the practice of social isolation in education or elsewhere in society.
- Inclusion is both an attitude and what one does to bring all learners together in community schools. It is not an abstract concept divorced from possibility.
- Social inclusion is justice in practice.
- Educators believe in social justice and possess the ability to implement it through their work.

Nodes of Action:

- Early childhood, elementary and secondary school systems.
- Canadian youth.
- Families and family organizations.
- Communities and their leaders.
- Persons experiencing disabilities and their organizations.
- Agents of change (e.g. governments, educator organizations, university Faculties of Education).

Program Participants:

Core:

- Marsha Forest Centre, Canadian Abilities Foundation, Canadian Association of Inclusive Educators.
- Funders.

Associated:

- Allie^d organizations with valuable knowledge and experience (e.g. People First, Friendship Centers, Family Networks).
- Strategic partnerships (e.g. Doers, Visionaries).
- Leaders in inclusive education across Canada.

Methods:

- Begin with a collaborative lead group of organizations known for their understanding of disability, education, and social inclusion and their contributions.
- Developing a “future” orientation (Change is a process).
- Collaborating, teaming, visioning, networking (We all are part of the process).
- Telling stories.
- Holding public events (e.g. Inclusive Education Month, International Day of Persons with Disability).
- Convening meetings and conferences for players in disability and education to share knowledge and develop strategies for change.
- Develop supportive print and visual resources.
- Use of social media to reach the Canadian public, particularly educators, families and youth.
- Use of print and visual modes of information dissemination (e.g. books, articles, websites).
- National advertising (e. g. billboard, radio, TV).
- Contributions of well-known spokespeople.

- Workshops for future teachers on inclusive education and its relationship to social inclusion.

Process: