

Meeting The Challenge: Inclusion and Diversity in Canadian Schools

In far too many Canadian schools, those who fall outside the norm are still segregated from their peers. Indeed, over 40% of Canadian children with intellectual disabilities are in special classes or segregated schools. It is time to end this archaic practice and put to use what we have learned about the positive impact of inclusive educational practices. Our children need to be educated in heterogeneous classrooms where the diversity of students is welcomed, celebrated and nurtured. Canada's schools need to become inclusive and reflective of the values of the society they serve.

Canada is an increasingly diverse nation. We claim to have accepted this diversity as a positive feature – an advantage we have over more homogeneous societies, including the melting pot culture of our southern neighbour. While this cultural diversity is more defined in urban Canada, where 80 per cent of the population now live, it is also a feature of the small towns and villages of rural Canada.

Schools, of necessity, must meet the needs of the communities they serve. Diverse communities require schools that can accommodate diversity. But we know that schools, as a rule, do not do this well. In fact, our schools are currently struggling to respond to their diverse student populations, including students with intellectual disabilities.

For the last two decades, advocates for these students have led the demand for inclusive schools. The reason is simple. Students with intellectual disabilities have been excluded by the practices of “traditional special education”, which placed them in segregated classes, segregated schools and, in some cases, residential institutions. Things have changed considerably over the last twenty years. Inclusion is now a Canadian value, and we can credit educators with tremendous progress in applying that value to our schools.

What do we mean by “inclusive education”? It is simple: children attend their community or neighbourhood schools and receive instruction in a regular class setting with non-disabled peers who are the same age. This approach is the natural way to organize our children's schooling. It starts by building on the existing sense of community in villages, towns and neighbourhoods. It is also the only approach to diversity that respects the complex fabric of our society in the 21st century.

Integration serves families well, but it does more. Research conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, clearly establishes that those nations with the highest degrees of social inclusion and heterogeneity in their schools not only get better results, they also narrow the gap between high and low achievers. By educating our

children together, in socially inclusive groups, we help assure consistently better outcomes for everyone.

To achieve these results, schools need to reject “traditional special education,” an approach that continues to segregate and isolate children who are different, in the name of “more appropriate” placements “that meet the child's needs.” This insidious approach labels children who do not learn easily or who do not learn in the usual ways as “defective,” or “not ready” for placement in regular classrooms with their peers. Yet it is an approach still highly regarded in many of Canada's most affluent and privileged communities. Ironically, those who support it fail to see its parallel to the “separate but equal” arguments that were soundly rejected in the United States case “Brown vs. Board of Education” – the case that forced de-segregation of public schools and strengthened the hand of the civil rights movement.

How radical is this integration? Not very. It has been the legislated policy of the Government of New Brunswick since 1986 and has made gains in most areas of Atlantic Canada, as well as in more rural areas throughout Canada. Interestingly, change has come more quickly in smaller, rural communities. In the larger urban areas, with more highly developed special education systems and more special interests at work, the change process has been slower.

Although many examples of good inclusive practice exist throughout Canada – it may even be possible to claim that Canada is a world leader in this area – progress has not been fast enough or thorough enough. Too many schools in too many communities have implemented inclusive practices, but only for some children and in some circumstances. Because they also continue to operate the traditional segregated system, they are funding two systems, and implementing both poorly. Recent cuts to special education services in Ontario, as well as crisis situations in Nova Scotia and British Columbia, are evidence of this.

Parents are confused by the ambiguity of educational policy. Most desire inclusion for their children, but only when they are confident that the school welcomes their child and can assure them of a quality education by well trained and well supported teachers. We need to invest whatever resources are available to keep class size reasonable and provide proper support to our teachers in the form of training initiatives, planning time, and the provision of para-professionals and professional support. The people now working in segregated special education services will need to be re-deployed unless taxpayers indicate a willingness to fund education much more generously than they do now.

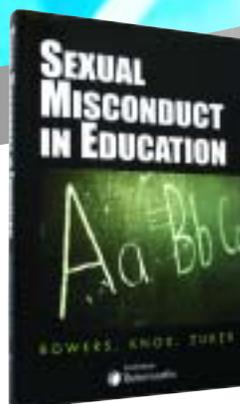
Inclusive education has become identified with parents of children with severe or multiple disabilities, who are demanding

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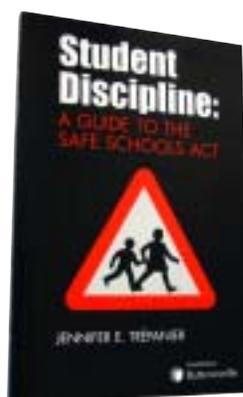
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that children with very different academic needs be accommodated in regular classrooms with their non-disabled peers. It is easy to misunderstand the intentions of those who advocate for inclusion. They do not expect the child with a serious intellectual disability to accomplish the same academic goals as the other children. However, they do want them to be there and participate as far as they can. They want them to be known by classmates as peers, deserving of dignity, of citizenship, and of a good life. They want teachers to utilize well-known and tested strategies to help their children achieve social and academic goals while participating in class with their peers. They want the social inclusion in school that will build a basis for social inclusion in society after schooling in over. Research clearly shows that children with disabilities educated in regular classes in primary and secondary school are much more likely to go on to higher education, employment, higher incomes, and more community participation in their adult lives, than children educated in segregated settings.

We need to adopt a clear vision for inclusion that represents the 21st century reality of Canada, and the 21st century aspirations of Canadians, and we need to challenge educational policy makers and leaders to put the structures and funding mechanisms in place to make that vision a reality.

Implementing inclusive education is indeed a challenge, but it is a challenge well worth the effort. It can assure our children a quality education in a society built on and supportive of diversity. In a recent statement, the Governor General of Canada said that

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Que signifie le terme « éducation inclusive » ? Au fond, c'est simple. Les enfants atypiques se rendent à l'école de leur collectivité ou de leur quartier pour y être instruits dans une classe ordinaire en compagnie d'enfants du même âge qui ne souffrent pas d'un handicap. C'est là l'approche la plus simple et naturel d'organiser la scolarisation de nos enfants. C'est également la seule façon d'offrir à une population diversifiée une éducation qui tienne compte du tissu complexe de la société du 21^e siècle. L'inclusion fait désormais partie des valeurs canadiennes qu'il faut pratiquer dans nos écoles.

National Inclusive Education Week reflects "some of the themes most dear to my heart: the importance of our public schools, the need for civility and compassion in our social structures, and the obligation to ensure that Canada's benefits are available to all Canadians." She's right. Our children, our communities and our country deserve no less. 🌍

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To move forward an agenda for inclusive public education, the Canadian Association is convening a 'National Summit on Inclusive Education' with a number of partners in Ottawa, November 24-26, 2004.

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