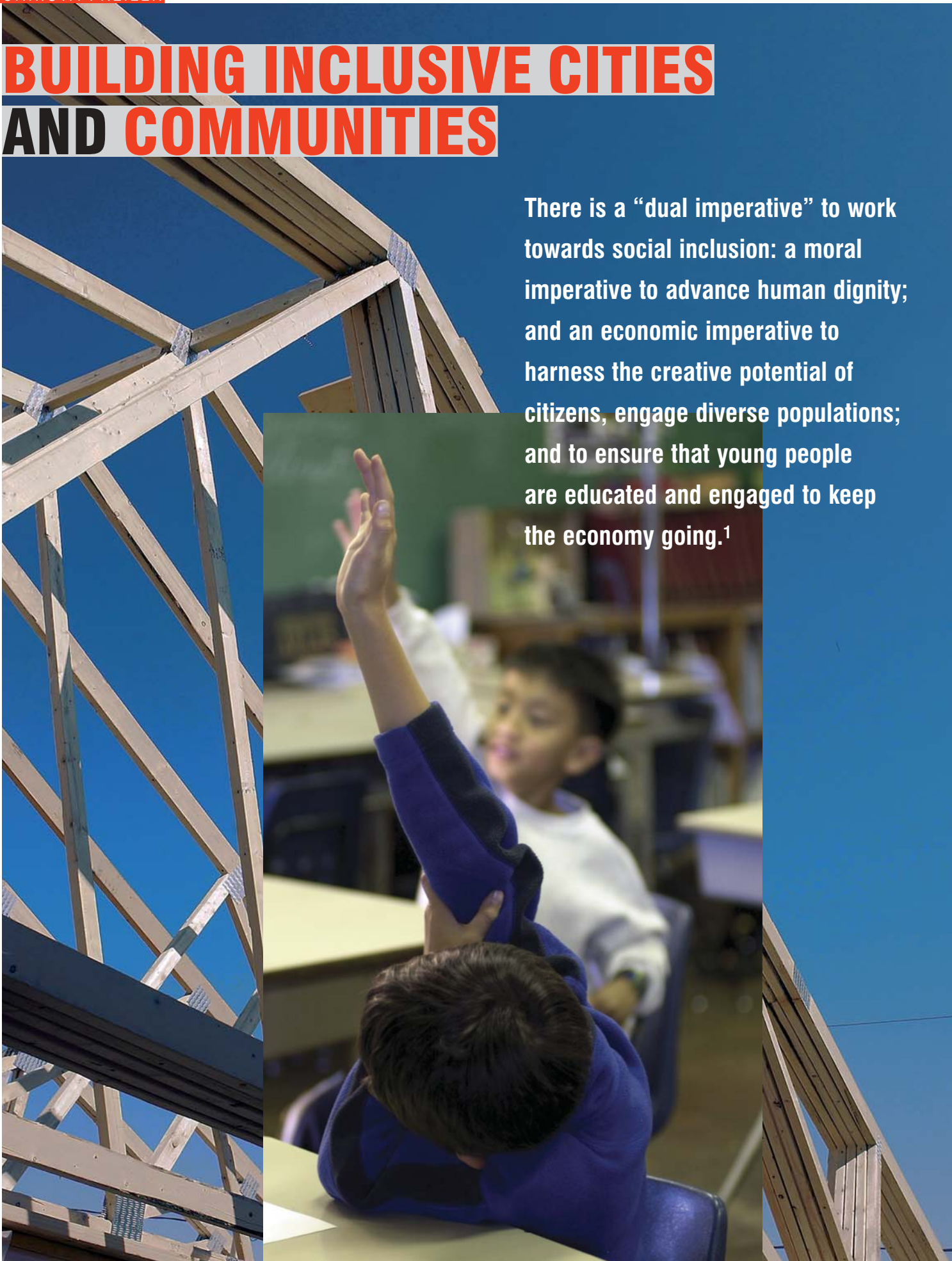


CHRISTA FREILER

BUILDING INCLUSIVE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

There is a “dual imperative” to work towards social inclusion: a moral imperative to advance human dignity; and an economic imperative to harness the creative potential of citizens, engage diverse populations; and to ensure that young people are educated and engaged to keep the economy going.¹



Canada prides itself on being an inclusive country. And, in many ways, this is justified. On the world stage, Canada has a reputation for tolerance and respect for diversity. Immigrants from all over the world arrive in Canada's cities with their families because they feel welcome and safe. Canada is one of a handful of countries in the world to allow gay marriages. Our local institutions such as municipal governments and schools promote inclusion through their policies and programs. We are a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A previous federal government went so far as to commit itself to making Canada "the most inclusive country in the world, where opportunity is shared among all Canadians."²

Social inclusion is about ensuring that *all* children, youth and adults are valued, respected and contributing members of their communities. It depends on recognizing and valuing both our commonalities and our differences. While inclusion provides obvious dividends to those who are marginalized, it benefits everyone both in terms of the vitality a society derives when all its members fully contribute and by removing the liabilities associated with exclusion. It is for this reason that international policy-makers such as the United Nations and the World Bank see social inclusion as key to the "equitable and sustainable growth" of nations. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has shown that a country's economic performance depends largely on the degree of secondary educational attainment and thus the level of inclusion secondary school systems provide.³

How well is Canada doing in living up to its reputation as an inclusive country? What are the characteristics and challenges of inclusive cities and communities? And what is the role of schools in building an inclusive society?

HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

Social inclusion is a "high mark" for where we want to be; it is not necessarily a description of where we are. Creating an inclusive Canada is both a process and a goal, and our achievements, albeit significant, are incomplete. Marvyn Novick suggests that "social inclusion can be selective or universal [but that] democratic concepts of universal citizenship lead to principles that value *full inclusion* – not 60% inclusion, not 80%, but a 100% standard of inclusion."⁴

Canada is far from achieving a 100 percent standard of inclusion. We need only look at the high levels of child and family poverty, particularly among certain groups, and the economic and historic exclusion of Aboriginal people in this country.

People with disabilities also continue to face poverty and exclusion in spite of progress over the past few decades. A recent Canadian survey found that only about 10 percent of respondents felt that persons with disabilities were "fully included". Three-quarters believed that people with disabilities were less likely to be hired for a job than those without disabilities, even when equally qualified; and only 13 percent of respondents felt that the needs of children with disabilities were fully met by our public education systems.⁵ Interestingly, the responses of people with and without disabilities were almost identical.

Research into public attitudes has shown that social

EN BREF Selon les recherches portant sur les attitudes du public, l'engagement envers l'inclusion sociale a augmenté chez les Canadiens au cours des 30 dernières années. Les pratiques sont toutefois à la traîne. Reconnaisant que le bien-être est étroitement lié à la qualité des quartiers et des villes, Inclusive Cities Canada (ICC) a vu le jour en 2003. Toutes les villes participantes sont conscientes que des conditions de vie inadéquates constituent le plus important obstacle à l'inclusion. Ensuite, citons la nécessité d'engager les jeunes dans la vie civique; de procurer dès l'enfance des possibilités d'apprentissage, des services de garde, des loisirs et des expériences artistiques; de promouvoir la citoyenneté active dans la gouvernance locale; de renforcer les écoles publiques en tant que lieux communautaires d'intégration qui relient des gens de différentes populations. Bien que les écoles canadiennes contribuent à atténuer l'impact de l'inégalité sociale sur les résultats des élèves, l'inégalité continue de menacer l'inclusion sociale.

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values have changed in Canada over the past 30 years. The "unstated assumptions" of previous years that some groups were superior to others has given way to more egalitarian values and greater acceptance and support for ethnic diversity (and, more recently, other "diversities"). These changing values resulted in the creation of official languages legislation and multiculturalism policies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, Canadians became less generous and accepting of others during the 1990s, when economic factors such as high unemployment, combined with eroding public services and spending cutbacks, threatened people's well-being and economic security.⁶

Despite changing values and the widespread introduction of policies to promote inclusion, Canada's experience with inclusion is inconsistent, uneven and sometimes even contradictory. Practice typically lags behind philosophy. Education offers a compelling illustration. Judy Lupart describes the creation of a separate special education stream, which is so common in Canadian schools, as "paradoxical" because it is "in direct contradiction to prevailing social views favouring inclusion." She argues that special education has become "a dominant second system" within Canadian schools because of "an incompatibility between the philosophy of inclusive education and policies and practices that continue to reinforce out-dated assumptions about student disability."⁷

A similar sentiment is expressed by Jean Kunz who argues that "Canada is a paradox" because, on the one hand, Canada is hailed as a model in 'managing diversity' and, on the other, racialized minorities continue to be excluded from the economic mainstream through unequal access to education, jobs and income.⁸

HOW INCLUSIVE ARE CANADA'S CITIES AND COMMUNITIES?

The well-being of children, youth and adults is closely tied to where they live, the quality of their neighbourhoods and cities, and the "social commons" where they interact with each other and share experiences. For most people, it is in their neighbourhoods and communities that they first experience inclusion or exclusion; for children, it is most often in their schools. For these reasons, there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of cities and communities as a focus for social inclusion work.



PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE PIVOTAL TO BUILDING INCLUSIVE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES BECAUSE THEY PLAY A DUAL ROLE AS BOTH CIVIC INSTITUTIONS AND LEARNING INSTITUTIONS.

Inclusive Cities Canada (ICC) was established in 2003 as a cross-Canada alliance of social planning organizations and local governments, with partners in Saint John, New Brunswick; Burlington, Ontario; Toronto; Edmonton; and Vancouver/North Vancouver. Funded by the federal government, ICC was a collaborative initiative of community and municipal government leaders working together to assess the 'inclusivity' of their cities. A civic panel was set up in each city to guide the local research, which took the form of structured dialogues with over 1,200 participants across Canada.

Social inclusion is context-specific, which means that it has more than one meaning. Inclusive Cities Canada identified the following as the key dimensions of inclusion in the context of cities and communities:

- *Institutional recognition of diversity* – How well do public institutions, such as local government, public education, and the police and justice system, provide valued recognition to diverse groups in the population?
- *Opportunities for human development* – What opportunities exist for children and youth to develop their talents, skills and capacities to contribute to the community?
- *The quality of civic engagement* – What are cities and communities doing to promote active participation in local government, community organizations and civic life?
 - *Cohesiveness of living conditions* – Are there significant differences in levels of income, decent jobs, safe neighbourhoods, and the availability of affordable housing among city residents?
 - *Adequacy of community services* – How well is the city served by important community and public services?

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

The social inclusion inquiries found that there were significant commonalities across the partner cities. In all cities, participants perceived that inadequate living conditions constituted the biggest barrier to inclusion, with gaps in incomes, housing and employment becoming wider. In addition, all cities were struggling with how to engage youth in civic life; strengthen public schools as community places of inclusion; extend opportunities for early learning, child care, recreation and arts experiences; and promote active citizen participation in local governance. Encouragingly, participants in all cities viewed diversity as an asset and rejected gated communities to keep people with differences out; they acknowledged the

contribution that public institutions and services such as schools, libraries, parks and recreation made to urban vibrancy; they all saw their local governments as largely accessible and willing to set policies addressing inclusion and diversity.

There were also issues that were distinct to each city. In Toronto, the emergence of economic disparities along racial lines was seen to threaten community cohesion. Edmonton and Vancouver were challenged to address the civic needs of urban Aboriginal peoples. Saint John had to find ways to make the city more attractive to immigrants; and Burlington had to learn how to take advantage of the recent increase in racial and ethnic diversity brought about by population growth.⁹

With respect to public education, participants consistently saw schools as institutions that were central to the well-being of both their children and their communities. However, participants were concerned that the public education system's capacity to foster civic citizenship was declining. Although the core role of public schools had been maintained, there was a concern that educational philosophy was shifting – away from preparing young people to be citizens and more in the direction of training young people for the job market. Finally, funding cutbacks in some cities were jeopardizing the quality of education and schools' capacities to engage parents and reach out to their communities.

BUILDING INCLUSIVE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES: THE DUAL ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Public schools are pivotal to building inclusive cities and communities because they play a dual role as both civic institutions and learning institutions, and because "school is where community happens for children and youth. When schools are inclusive, communities become inclusive too."¹⁰

Schools as civic institutions

As civic institutions, schools are an essential part of the social infrastructure of cities, along with parks, libraries and community services, increasingly recognized as being as important to the health of cities as physical infrastructure. As a universal social program, schools are very strategic and important vehicles for building and maintaining our "social commons". They contribute to social inclusion by acting as shared public space that connects people from diverse populations. In a recent book on how cities shape our country, John Lorinc argues:

If healthy neighbourhoods are the building blocks of cities, strong public schools are the glue that holds diverse urban communities together. Besides their core educational function, the public school system remains the only institution in our society where children, teens, and adults from vastly different cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds can come together in a non-commercial environment for extended periods, during which they'll learn at least as much from one another as they will from their teachers.¹¹

Many schools play an important civic role as community hubs, as contributors to the life and vibrancy of their neighbourhoods, and as welcoming places in reaching out to all parents to engage them in their children's education.

Schools can also contribute to building inclusive cities by



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modeling inclusive behaviour as employers, and as democratic institutions in which students have a voice. To this end, ICC recommended that:

- provincial and municipal governments require civic institutions, such as hospitals, schools and universities, to develop benchmarks and timetables for the diversification of senior management and professional positions to reflect the diversities of the city, in an effort to promote *leadership equity strategies*; and
- secondary schools introduce student feedback processes to assess and make recommendations regarding the extent to which different cultures and student experiences are reflected in the curriculum.¹²

Schools as learning institutions

In many ways, schools' contribution to social inclusion, as *learning institutions*, has posed a greater challenge partly because of the demands on schools to include all students in the life and activities of the schools themselves, as well as to prepare students for participation in the larger community.

From an access point of view, schools can fail the 'inclusion test' by the outright exclusion or segregation of certain groups of children, such as the over 40 percent of Canadian children with intellectual disabilities who are in special classes or segregated schools,¹³ or the thousands of children residing with their mothers in homeless shelters in Toronto and other large Canadian cities.¹⁴

The disproportionately high drop-out rates among certain populations and the gaps in achievement between groups of students suggest that, as learning institutions, schools still have a long way to go in equalizing the life chances of children and youth and in ensuring the optimal development of all children. Some are arguing that current gaps in achievement would be greatly reduced by classroom and teaching practices that resulted in "deeper learning" and greater intellectual engagement.

Recurrent discussions in Toronto of the need for a Black-focused school also reflect a concern that schools do not adequately engage, value or teach certain students because of low expectations on the part of schools and/or an inability to adapt to the different needs of individual students and the growing diversity of students in Canadian communities. School-related reasons, such as boredom and perceived irrelevance, contribute significantly to student disengagement and dropping out. CEA's drama project, *Imagine a School...*, revealed that adolescent learners are begging for classroom activities and curricula that are intellectually challenging, i.e. stimulating, exciting, dynamic and worth learning.

It is well known that, by international standards, Canada does very well with respect to many aspects of public education. Less well known, but equally important to building an inclusive and cohesive country, is the fact that there is significant variation across schools in the level of student achievement. In this country, it makes a big difference where children live and which schools they go to; in Finland, by contrast, opportunities to learn are virtually the same all over the country. It is Finland's "pedagogical philosophy and practice ... that school is for every child and that the school must adjust to the needs of every child, not the other way around."¹⁵

In conclusion, we should remember that social inclusion

is a normative – i.e. value-based – concept. This means that there has to be a shared vision and understanding of what is meant by an inclusive school and an inclusive community. Equally important, we must acknowledge and understand how public education's historic role as a "sorter" of children continues to act as an impediment to moving forward on building inclusive schools and communities. Social inclusion is not, as some have suggested, "counter cultural". It may, however, require a break with the past. As the OECD asks: "Can a system designed to sort and reward the most able be reformed in such a way as to help everyone fulfill their (very diverse) potential? Or, if reform is impossible, is a kind of educational revolution on the agenda for learning?"¹⁶ |

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Notes

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