

Equity, Social Justice, Disability and Secondary Schools



What Regular Subject Teachers Can Do

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

• Equity, Social Justice, Disability and Schools	5
• Setting a Context: School, Equity, Social Justice and Belonging	8
• Character Building in Disability, Social Justice and Inclusion.	13
• Benefits of Interaction with Peers Experiencing Disability for Regular Peers	15
• Concepts and Methods	17
• What Do We Know About Character Building, Goals and Disability.	21
Improved Academic Achievement.	20
Improved Social Relationships.	22
Safe and Orderly Schools.	23
Reduced Behaviour Problems.	24
Improved Life Preparation.	26
Improved Employability Skills	27
• Character Building: An Infrastructure for Curriculum and Social Justice	29
• Your Teaching and Your Students Experiencing Disabilities.	32
• Human Rights in Schools	35
• What Can You Do?	38
• How Can I Be a Model of Equity, Social Justice and Belonging.	39
• How You Can Do It.	43
• Another Theoretical Thought	45
• Going Further in Your Classroom	46
• Questions You Should Ask Yourself.	50
• Concluding Thoughts.	51
• Appendix A: Character Building: Approaches to an Inclusive Curriculum.	53
• Appendix B: Differentiation of Instruction.	55
• Appendix C: Person Centered Planning.	56
Circle of Friends	59
MAPS	62
PATH	63
PlayFair Teams: A School Culture Strategy	64
Useful Resources	66
• Inclusion Press.	66 - 74
• L'Arche Canada.	75 - 76
• About the Authors.	77



Equity, Social Justice, Disability and Schools

What Regular Subject Teachers Can Do

This resource is a response to increasing requirement by Canadian Ministries of Education for schools to address issues of equity and social justice. Equity and social justice in schools touches on the needs of all students. One group, learners experiencing disabilities, is our greatest concern and the focus of this resource. Learners experiencing disabilities are the only group that many educators believe it appropriate to segregate from their typical peers. They are the only students where numerous members do not have the right to attend regular classrooms of community schools on a routine basis. Despite mounting research evidence to the contrary and recent international policy, the majority of school administrators and teachers continue to believe that the special education system is the best solution for assisting many learners experiencing disabilities to achieve their potential. They believe learners experiencing

disabilities need separate settings and specially prepared teachers to teach them in those settings.

The rationale for this belief is that most students experiencing disabilities do not have the academic skills for secondary schools. The unfortunate result for many learners experiencing disabilities, however, is lack of a sense of belonging in school society in the same way as do other students.

We believe that you, the regular classroom teacher, are the key to giving all students a sense of belonging in your classroom. Others, a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT¹), an Educational Assistant (EA¹), or a parent, or other volunteer can support you in creating a sense of belonging in your classroom. But you are the key. You are the only person who can create a sense of belonging for all your students.

Teacher Magic

A teacher is a practicing magician.
He creates knowledge where there was a void.
She finds capacity where uncertainty lived.
He excites and inflames learning.
She teaches the soul as well as the mind.
Their contribution is the future of our nation.

Gary Bunch

¹Titles given to these school staff members vary from place to place.



In the past, regular classroom teachers learned to view themselves as unprepared for this responsibility. Their experience has been that Special Education Resource Teachers (SERT) and Educational Assistants (EA) are the only ones who can accept the responsibility. This belief has become so ingrained that, even when learners experiencing disabilities are placed in regular classrooms, they are taught separately from their able-bodied peers in many ways.

The system did not create these beliefs deliberately. When the special education system first was developed, it was a boon to those experiencing disabilities. Prior to that, almost all learners experiencing disabilities were excluded from schools of any kind. It took years to bring them into the education system, even though the practice was to separate them in segregated schools and classes. It took even longer for some to be placed in regular classrooms, if only for some subjects. The special education system of segregation, special treatment, and cure seemed appropriate in the past. It still seems acceptable to many educators and others.

Recent changes in government and school system policies reflect increased understanding that many students are not as fully a part of the school community as would be wished. Our world society is embarking on the adventure of accepting all learners as members of the regular classrooms of the school system. This adventure, while challenging, will complete the circle of community in education by ensuring that all learners feel they belong as members of that community. The challenge now is to act on this knowledge to support teachers in welcoming all students and to move to a more positive and equitable educational future.

Schools are to play a leading role in forming the character of the youth of our nation, and in realizing equity and social justice for all. That is the current message from governments and senior educational administrators. But it is not “schools” that hold the responsibility for forming the character of our young people, except in the broad sense of corporate responsibility. The elemental responsibility rests in the hands of the individual teacher. This is an individual



responsibility. Teachers are the agents of society entrusted with the task of educating all learners, not only those who learn without the challenge of being disabled. They are to act in collaboration with those whose roles it is to supply teachers with the professional knowledge and support to do the job. Additionally, more than ever before, teachers are to work closely with parents. Fortunately, teachers such as you are being prepared for strengthening equity and social justice in the classroom. With you, your good will, and your professional ability, there is an excellent chance of success.

This resource presents ways for teachers to respond to these possibilities against the background of character development programs now in common use in our schools. In our experience working with various schools and school systems in Canada, the opportunities given to other groups of learners can be extended to learners experiencing disabilities. Planned, careful change in this direction holds potential to lead all young people of our nation to feel that they belong in our schools without any sense of discrimination. This new understanding has led to introduction of programs, such as character development, which are aimed at equity and social justice. The power of schools to lead our society is being recognized as never before. Regular class teachers are central to the success of such programs. The promise is that present and future teachers will alter societal understanding of, and response to, learners experiencing disabilities, as they already are doing for all other groups of students.

You learn to talk by talking.

You learn to read by reading.

You learn to write by writing.

You learn to include by including.

Gary Bunch (1999)

Reach and Teach

Our job is to reach and teach
the kids we have;
not the kids we used to have,
not the kids we wish we had,
not the kids who exist
only in our dreams.

Spence, Chris. (2009). TDSB Vision
of Hope. Toronto:
Toronto District School Board.



Setting a Context: School, Equity, Social Justice and Belonging

Social justice, equity, and belonging are closely associated with how teachers facilitate principles of equity through their treatment of the curriculum, individual achievement, and individual behaviour. For learners experiencing disabilities, restricted access to the common curriculum and perceived inadequacies in individual academic or personal achievement, have acted as barriers to equity, social justice, and belonging. Nevertheless, the history of how learners experiencing disabilities have been served in schools has been progressively positive in welcoming these learners more and more into the school system. It has been a long trail over many years, but acceptance and progress always have continued to unfold. This resource is intended to support you in continuing the progressive, positive welcome being accorded learners with disabilities, the last group of students in Canada to be welcomed into regular classrooms of community schools.

As we all are aware, our governments and school systems are emphasizing the value of ensuring that all learners are welcomed in our schools, no matter what types of difference may exist. Teachers are doing a good job in terms of almost every difference. It is how to work with students differing in academic or behavioural ability level that continues to test our professional skills.

It is not our intent in this resource to change regular classroom teachers into special

education teachers or into social workers. That would be both foolish and negative. It is our hope that the resource will support you in working with your students experiencing disabilities as you continue to model equity and social justice through your teaching.

It was not until the 1960's that some students were integrated into regular classrooms. Prior to that, they were in special schools and special classes, or not in school at all. With this change a limited number were integrated on a part-time basis and only for non-core subjects. For other subjects, such as language and sciences, most students returned to what was considered their homeroom. That is, they returned to special classes. However, some students experiencing disabilities were considered able to remain in regular classrooms on a full-time basis, especially if an EA were made available, and if able to cope academically. In general, these students remained the responsibility of the SERT and the EA much more so than that of the regular classroom teacher. They still did not belong as did their able-bodied peers. A major concern with this model is that continued presence in the regular classroom on a part-time or full-time basis in many instances depends on continued, acceptable academic and social (read behavioural) progress. Under the special education model, if these aspects are seen as problematic, the student may be moved to a special setting separated from the regular classroom. This can happen to no other group

of students. This dynamic is a major weakness of the Special Education Model. No student under this Model is safe in assuming that he or she belongs in a regular classroom. Modest academic or social progress, even a change in teachers or school administrators, can result in a transfer to a special education setting segregated from one's typical peers.

Taken together, special schools, special classes, and full-time integration only for selected students, constitute the educational reality for most learners experiencing disabilities in Canada. Much progress has been made. Some situations are very positive and learners experiencing disabilities are accepted by regular classroom teachers and by their peers. In other situations, learners experiencing disabilities are not warmly welcomed and do not become members of the classroom in the same sense as do their typical peers. Unfortunately, barriers to equity and social justice in education remain for many students under all aspects of the special education model. There is no assurance of belonging in regular classrooms and forming normal social relationships, an assurance other learners have. One major result is social isolation of many of these learners.

Fortunately, more and more teachers are recognizing the inequity of treating learners experiencing disabilities differently in the school system.

Recently, the concept of inclusive education, educating all learners together in regular classrooms under the leadership of the classroom teacher has evolved. Under this new model all necessary resources, the knowledge of specially trained teachers, the skills of EAs, accommodations and modifications to learning tasks, accessible curricula, and differentiated instruction are brought to the support of regular classroom teachers and all students in any classroom. Student to student interaction is a priority. There also is the knowledge and security that the regular classroom is the home-room for all learners. There is no default to segregated settings.

As noted all Canadian school systems are moving to inclusion of all learners, no matter what differences exist. Inclusion has become a priority issue. An example is the Ontario Ministry of Education vision for the future laid out in a recent publication, {Realizing the Promise of Diversity.....Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009)}

Loneliness and the feeling
of being unwanted is the
most terrible poverty.

Mother Teresa

