

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – THE BASICS

Gary Bunch

Inclusive Education for students with disability remains a poorly understood concept and practice. It is confused by many who associate it with the traditional Special Education Model (Winzer, 1999). However, Inclusive Education is radically different from Special Education. Vaughn and Forest describe the genesis of Inclusive Education in Toronto, Canada in 1988. Furthermore, Inclusive Education for students with disability has been United Nations policy since 1999. In that year UNESCO leading educators from around the globe met in Salamanca, Spain to discuss the future of education for those with disabilities. Their final decision was to move from the segregation based Special Education Model to Inclusive Education, a model in which all students learn together in regular classroom settings. The Salamanca Statement endorsed Inclusive Education. Specifically, UNESCO called for all nations to move to Inclusive Education saying that,

Those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child-centered pedagogy with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combatting discriminatory attitudes,, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for the majority of children and prove the efficiency and ultimately the cost effectiveness of the entire schools system.

In 2006 the United Nations declared the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in Article 24 repeated and strengthened its earlier policy on education for those with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system or from secondary education on the basis of disability.

The Convention stated that:

Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality, free primary and secondary system on an even basis with others in the communities in which they live.

My Perspective

I should at the beginning of this series of short considerations of Inclusive Education provide my perspectives on the move from the Special Education Model to the Inclusive Education Model.

I have been working in the area of education for students with disabilities since 1960. Until the late 1970s my focus was education for students who were deaf. These students attended residential schools. The students came from every part of Ontario, a very large Canadian province. Every student was required to live at the school 5 days of the week even if they lived in the town in which their school was situated. Due to the distances involved and as there was no school bus service, almost every student did not return to their homes except for the summer and Christmas season holidays.

I say this to let the viewer/reader understand that I am closely familiar with the Special Education Model. At that time, we teachers and administrators worked diligently to the best we could. We were proud of our efforts. Up to that time, the term Inclusive Education was unknown.

However, when I became a senior administrator, I was able to find ways for students to go to their homes on a daily basis. That still meant that many students were full-time residential students, but a goodly number were going home by bus every day. Eventually I left schools for the deaf for a university professor position. At that time I met others who felt a new system was needed. I worked with Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint and others with and without disabilities in the early development of Inclusive Education. This has been a far more rewarding direction.

As a university professor I have undertaken various research projects and written many articles and books dealing with the change from the Special Education Model to the Inclusive Education Model.

One of my research studies was a study of what Canadians meant when they used terms such as Special Education and Inclusive Education.

The study was national in scope. One important component was a series of regional meetings involving persons with disabilities, families, government representatives, educational administrators, university professors and teachers. Other strategies were used as well. The majority of responses to our questions indicated that there was considerable confusion regarding education for students with disabilities. However, the majority upheld change to the differences between the two Models. Their responses were used to create definitions for each of the terms used in the study. Here is the definition derived for Inclusive Education.

Inclusive Education refers to educational practice based on the philosophical belief that all learners, those with and without disabilities, have the right to be educated together in age-appropriate class groups, and that all students will benefit from education together in the regular classrooms of community schools. Within these settings teachers, parents, and others work collaboratively using appropriate and sufficient resources to interpret and enact the regular curriculum in flexible manner in accordance with the individual abilities and needs of all learners.

This definition is used in many parts of Canada and is referred to as a guide in a variety of other nations.