

Educators want inclusive classrooms, Bunch-led study proves

A majority of Canadian educators support integrating exceptional children into regular classrooms, a national study, led by York education professor Gary Bunch, has found.

Bunch conducted the study, entitled *Resistance and Acceptance: Educator Attitudes to Inclusion of Students with Disabilities*, with colleagues Margaret Brown of Acadia University and Judy Lupart of the University of Calgary.

They were assisted by six graduate students, including three from York: Grace Gingrich, Andrene Reynolds and Angela Vales. Two of the York students themselves have disabilities: one is deaf and the other has a learning disability.

"Up to now, most studies have concentrated on the concerns teachers and school administrators have with including children with disabilities in regular classrooms," says Bunch. "This study breaks new ground by discovering that, in spite of these concerns, most teachers and educators believe that inclusion is an educational good – that both exceptional kids and their 'regular' peers benefit from inclusion."

Bunch has studied this issue for 30 years, both as a professor and as a teacher in residential schools for the deaf.

The research team looked at the attitudes of elementary and secondary school educators from a

range of schools: fully inclusive; integrated or mainstreamed (where some exceptional students spend their day in regular classrooms, while others move between the regular classroom and a special classroom); and segregated, where special education structures exist completely outside of the regular curriculum.

More than two-thirds of the educators interviewed believed that inclusion was academically beneficial for both exceptional children and their peers in a regular classroom. Approximately 90 per cent believed that inclusion produced social benefits for both groups. And almost all educators in the study expressed concerns that support and proper training for teachers were necessary to make inclusion practical and successful.

Government policies toward educating children with disabilities vary from province to province. In Ontario, official government policy favours integration into regular classrooms, but there are currently only six school boards out of 168 with fully inclusive systems. They include the York Region, Durham, Halton, Hamilton-Wentworth, Waterloo Region and Wellington County Separate School Boards.

"Above all else, teachers believe that students of all abilities need to interact with each other. School is an ideal place for kids to learn that our society is diverse, and that we

all bring different qualities to the world," says Bunch.

"Teachers want inclusion to work because they recognize that it is best for the included kids and their classmates. And the policy and practice implications that arise out of this study don't necessarily mean more money. We just need to make some choices about how we allocate resources: do we pay for two parallel systems, one for mainstream kids and one for exceptional kids, or do we figure out a way to integrate those systems?"

The results of the study, conducted from 1994 to 1997, come from three sources. Some 2,250 educators received questionnaires and 1,492 (or 67 per cent) responded. The authors analyzed respondents' spontaneous written comments and conducted in-depth interviews with 135 educators.

How to make inclusion work

They also explored how changes to educational policies and practices can make inclusion work more effectively. They consulted research partners – organizations such as the Canadian Council for Exceptional Children, the Canadian Association for Community Living, ministries of education, school systems cooperating in the study, and the Canadian Teachers' Federation – for their views on the study's implications for government, school systems,

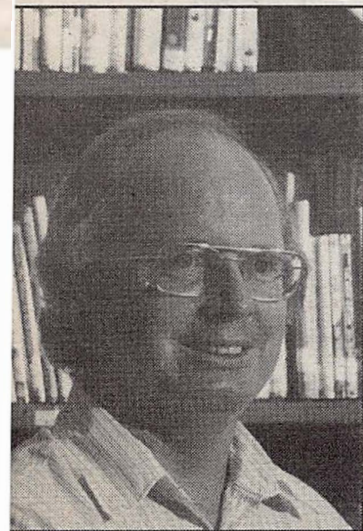
support/advocacy organizations and faculties of education.

"The policy and practice implications that came out of the meetings with our research partners were far-reaching, but, I believe, very workable," says Bunch.

"One of our primary conclusions is that past solutions to the challenge of educating exceptional children will not work. We can't just keep current structures in place, continuing to throw money at the problem by, for example, hiring more teaching assistants, without dealing with teachers' concerns: that they aren't trained properly to deal with inclusion, and that their administrators and school boards often aren't giving them the kind of support they need to make inclusion work."

The final phase of Bunch, Brown and Lupart's study begins this fall, when they will publish the first of five booklets about inclusion. The first booklet will be a review of the current research on inclusion, and the other four will be manuals for elementary and secondary teachers and principals on how to make inclusion work.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded the majority of the \$100,000 four-year study in cooperation with the Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat, part of Human Resources Development Canada.



Gary Bunch

From York
University
Gazette
From York
University
Gazette 1997