

# Thought ~~Answer~~ Piece

Why is inclusive education, educating typical learners and their peers experiencing disabilities in the same classrooms, important for all learners? Why is it important for our entire society?

The right to education was gained by Canadians experiencing disabilities only in the recent past. Prior to approximately the late 1970s and early 1980s, schools did not have to educate learners experiencing disability. Some centers maintained special schools, but few admitted those experiencing disability to regular classroom settings alongside their typical peers. Though some school systems did decide to educate students experiencing disability, there was no legal requirement to do so. Even when some students experiencing disability were admitted to school, it was mostly those with mild and moderate levels of challenge who could cope in acceptable fashion with the academic and behavioural standards of the schools.

But, eventually, provincial and territorial governments began to pass legislation requiring school systems to provide access for students with diverse abilities. The result was increase in the number of special schools and great increase in the number of special classes. Some more capable students experiencing disabilities were admitted, conditionally, to regular class settings. These moves all were in accord with the special education model under which a student is placed according to individual academic achievement and behavioural quality. The special education model was considered the strongest response to the need to educate learners experiencing disability. One of the negative aspects of the special education model was that students were segregated for their education. This resulted in distancing learners experiencing disabilities from their

typical peers, both in school and community. This unfortunate result was considered acceptable in order to maintain strong education.

Today, the special education model is challenged by the inclusive education model. Proponents of inclusive education argue that inclusion will result in a stronger education system and more flexible, accepting communities. Why? What advantages, if any, does the inclusive model have over the existing model still endorsed by the majority of Canadian educational jurisdictions?

Here are a few things we now know about the advantages of the inclusive education model.

- Inclusion in the school system results in more accepting and positive communities and stronger education. Inclusion is supported by the United Nations and its various bodies as the most appropriate answer to issues of diversity and moving forward into the future. To the UN, inclusion is a matter of human rights and social justice.
- Learners experiencing disability achieve at higher academic levels in inclusive settings than in special education settings. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- Learners experiencing disabilities develop greater behavioural strength in inclusive settings. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- The learning of typical learners is not negatively affected by the inclusion of peers experiencing disability. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.

- The learning of typical learners is strengthened and expanded, particularly in understanding of diversity and equity, by inclusion of learners experiencing disability. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- Inclusion promotes friendships and understanding between typical students and their peers experiencing disabilities. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- Regular classroom teachers, supported by their administrators and specialized resource staff, can teach classes diverse in abilities. This fact, increasingly, is being demonstrated by teachers working in inclusive settings.

The question at the head of this discussion really should be, “Why have so many Canadian governments and educators continued to support the special education approach when inclusion is a more socially just and effective, and practical approach, not just for learners experiencing disability, but for all students – and for their communities.