

# Disability - Education – Inclusion

A Collection of  
Blogs  
Articles  
Thought Pieces

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check the Canadian Abilities Foundation website.**

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## ***DISABILITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION***

***I am really interested*** in inclusive education and disability. When the issue is disability, inclusive education means kids with disabilities are educated in the same classes as all the other kids. This, as you likely know, is a big change from special education. The big difference is that special education believes that some students with disabilities need to be segregated from their typical peers. They must go to special classes or special schools. There is no segregation in inclusion.

***Special education was a boon*** to kids with disabilities when it began to take off around the middle of the last century. Before that, kids with disabilities mostly were not in school. The growth of special education meant that they could get an education, even though they had to go to segregated settings. At that time, special education was a really big change – and a positive one.

***But change does not stop.*** Progress continues to be made. New and better ways to do things are found. That does not mean that the older ways were bad. It just means that new ideas and new ways to do things have been found, and that they do a better job than the older ideas and methods.

***That is what is happening*** in education for learners with disabilities. We have learned that inclusion in regular classrooms of community schools is better education than is exclusion. Teachers, who used to practice special education methods, but now have moved to inclusion, have found it to work. The needs the students have do not disappear when students with diverse abilities are included. Inclusive education requires all the supports that special education does, but the support is delivered in the regular classroom, not in a special setting. When they are included, almost every kid is happier. They are accepted. They learn. In fact, research is now saying that inclusive education is better for all the kids. Those with disabilities learn from their typical peers. Their typical peers benefit from having more diversity in their classroom. They learn lessons about life that are not taught in textbooks, and they have a more complete understanding of what community means. The United Nations recognized this when it declared its policy of Education For All, and said that education in the regular classroom is the right of all learners. Inclusive education is more socially just for all and leads to stronger education for all.

***That doesn't mean*** that everyone agrees with inclusive education. Not everyone agrees with change. Change upsets some people – especially when that change challenges what they always have believed. Inclusive education is a revolution in how we think about disability and learning. Revolutions tend to create a lot of heat and friction. It takes time for things to settle down and for change to be accepted.

We need to go through the heat and friction of revolutionary change in education to reach social justice for learners with disabilities. The benefits are worthy of the struggle.

Blog, March 2009

## ***EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION***

*You may have seen* the recent movie, Slumdog Millionaire. It was shot in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. The movie began with shots of a section of Mumbai called Dharavi. Dharavi is known as the largest slum in Asia, and is home to some 700,00 people. The conditions in Dharavi are tragic for many of its inhabitants, particularly the children, most of whom have little to look forward to in life.

*I know Dharavi* because I have worked with the National Resource Centre for Inclusion (NRCI) in Mumbai. Under the leadership of Dr. Mithu Alur, NRCI is giving many young children in Dharavi a chance for a better life. Dr. Alur and her colleagues have begun an inclusive early childhood program (Ugam) in Dharavi.

*The Dharavi Ugam program* is the most exciting program in inclusive education I have seen anywhere. I have been privileged to visit the program frequently as a consultant, and, working with the Marsha Forest Centre of Toronto, to provide financial support.

*Today, some 16 individual preschool centers* (Anganwadis) have been set up in Dharavi. A morning and an afternoon program runs in each, with about 50 children each half day. At present, 16 individual Anganwadis are operating. If my figures are correct (and the figures are changing as the program continues to expand), up to 1600 children are being educated through the Ugam program each year.

*The first step* in setting up the program was to approach the Street Bosses in Dharavi. Street Bosses are people who control parts of the slum. Without their agreement, it is very difficult to begin any new program in Dharavi and to have it safe from various problems. The Street Bosses see value for the children in the program and have been very supportive of its initiation and expansion.

*The teachers in the Anganwadis* are not typical teachers. They are mothers from the slum who receive some pedagogical training from NRCI. They are supported by a number of NRCI staff who visit and support the Anganwadis on a regular basis. Continuing professional development ensures that the mother-teachers extend their skills.

*The Ugam program* runs on a shoe string. The Anganwadis are very limited in space. You would not see so many children in such small spaces in Canada. The children write on small, old-fashioned slates. Books and paper, even pencils and crayons, are far too expensive. Only a few rudimentary teaching supplies are available. The mother-teachers do their best to create teaching aids from whatever materials they can access.

*As I write this it sounds* very bleak. However, a visit to an Anganwadi denies this. They are happy places, full of confident learners. The children's faces beam as they go about their lessons and as they receive visitors. They dress their best on their birthdays and holy days of their religions. Wearing their finery gives them an opportunity to shine.

*Each Anganwadi* is attended by a diversity of children. All are from the slum and are what we would call “of low socio-economic status”. The “girl child” is a focus, as many girls in India, and particularly in slum environments, do not have access to education. Another focus is children with disabilities. A variety of religions are represented. The program is inclusive in many ways.

*Children learn from four different curricula.* They study an early childhood curriculum based on the English model. They study a locally developed nutrition and personal hygiene curricula. As you might expect, nutrition and hygiene are major concerns in a slum environment. Lastly they study English. A degree of competency in English opens up many opportunities.

*The children do not miss their classes* if at all possible. Their parents know that an education can be a passport out of the slum. Having their children go to an Anganwadi is a sacrifice for families. Children, no matter how young, are part of the workforce of Dharavi. The families are sacrificing part of their incomes by sending their children to the program.

*Slumdog Millionaire portrayed the dark side* of the Dharavi slum. And it is a daunting and challenging environment. but the early childhood program started by Mithu Alur and her colleagues show another side of Dharavi. There is personal striving for improvement and willingness of the individual, no matter how young, to work hard and sacrifice in search of a better life.

*As I said at the beginning,* the Ugam program is the most exciting inclusive education program I have seen anywhere. It is an example of what can be done with imagination and the effort needed to change imagination to reality.

Blog, May 2009.

## ***DENYING THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION***

***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?”

Thought piece, 2010

## ***WORLD-WIDE CHANGE TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES***

***I recently attended*** an international conference focused on inclusive education, educating learners experiencing disabilities with their typical peers in regular classrooms of community schools. The conference was held in Salamanca, Spain and was in recognition of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994. The Salamanca Statement was the first strong, international call for movement away from the special education model and segregation to preference for all learners to be educated in the same classrooms of typical schools.

***The conference was an amazing experience.*** Participants came from over 60 nations. Every continent was represented. A number of Ministers of Education and United Nations level officials were there. Parents, teachers, professors, advocates, persons experiencing disabilities, young people, older people, government officials, and people speaking a multitude of languages all were there.

***We sat together,*** thought together, examined barriers to inclusion together, considered needs and solutions together, argued together, and laughed together. The wonderful part was that it was a meeting of about 400 people, all of whom were positive regarding inclusion, but realistic regarding the effort and the time it will take for substantial change to inclusion to occur. Education systems are more known for their resistance to change than for innovation when it comes to learners experiencing disabilities is an enormous task.

***Is change happening?*** Yes and no.

***I sat with two women from Libya*** who described that country's plans to spread inclusive education within its borders. They described a well-ordered, well-conceptualized, ambitious series of moves over time. Their objective is to begin small with a limited number of schools, but to progressively build out from that base. By 2013, they aim to have a significant number of schools working inclusively, to have provided professional development to a large number of teachers, and to have a support system for schools and teachers.

***My friend and colleague,*** Rima Al-salah of Mississauga, Ontario has been invited to travel to Libya to present a workshop on inclusion and autism in support of that nation's plans for positive change. It is interesting that, while other nations recognize the leaders we have in our midst, sometimes little recognition is apparent in Canada. That is one reason why a number of us, including Rima, have begun the Canadian Association of Inclusive Educators (CAIE). We need to be more active in advocating and supporting change to inclusion for all. If you wish information on CAIE, check [caie.info](http://caie.info). Let teachers and other educators in your communities know about it.

***While in Salamanca,*** I also I listened to young people from South America, Africa, and Europe speak of their experiences with segregation, and of their vision for

inclusion. They dedicated themselves to rejection of a paternalistic and limiting education system and to personal activism in favour of inclusion. One person in particular, Mia, a young woman from Lebanon, who happens to have Down Syndrome as part of her being, spoke forcefully of her passion for inclusion. Mia, her mother, other friends, and I spent considerable time together discussing the progress in Lebanon.

*These people* from Libya and Lebanon are at the very beginning of movement to inclusion. They are representative of many others at the conference, planning for the future and new opportunities for all learners. Realistically, they have far to go in order to achieve their goals. However, they also have the determination, belief in human rights, and the value of all children of a community to interacting with each other.

*I discussed with Canadian advocates* and educators their personal and professional leadership in making Canadian schools inclusive. They are familiar with the strong progress in some parts of our nation and the strong resistance in other parts. The inclusive policies of New Brunswick and our three northern territories and of an increasing number of individual school systems are examples well known in other countries.

*However, most Canadian jurisdictions* continue to support the special education model for "those learners who are unable to benefit from education with their typical peers". In my view, if the eventual objective is inclusion, it is an error to continue to have two paths for education and disability in education policy. I would suggest that inclusion should be the common objective. If there are some students whose needs and abilities mean that an inclusive program cannot be worked out easily, the planning for these students is an exception and not, and should not be considered as an alternate path for an entire group of students. If there is a readily available, approved alternate choice, too many will turn to it instead of really working on inclusion for all.

*Additionally, some jurisdictions* and school systems use the term "inclusion" for educational placement choices that are part of the special education model. They seem to think that inclusion is just another option under the special education model. It is not simply another option. It is the only option based on acceptance and human rights in education for all. It is challenging to move people to understanding of what human rights and social justice in education mean for learners experiencing disabilities and their families. Education is a conservative profession. The majority of people who are responsible for education are more known for their conservatism than for flexibility and innovation. They must be supported in realizing that inclusion is a new and stronger way to look at all learners in order to develop a socially just education society.

*We in Canada* need to renew and stiffen our resolve to move inclusive education forward. We know from our experience that inclusion is possible and its results positive. Now we need to persuade our governments and school systems that inclusion is here to stay, and that they must shake off educational conservatism and move with other nations into the future.

*We have the knowledge* to support positive change in Canada. New Brunswick and our three northern territories have policies of inclusion and have invested in inclusive practice. Another recognition of Canadian expertise in inclusive education comes from England. Jackie Bajus and Les Galambos, both of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB) are on a speaking tour in England as I write this blog.. They were invited by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education in Bristol. They will discuss how HWCDSB became the first entire school system in North America, and perhaps in the world, to move to inclusion.

*It is heartening* that this week, on the International Day for Persons with Disabilities, the Canadian federal government announced that it is moving to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Canada will catch up to a number of other nations that have ratified the Convention. Hopefully the message will get to all provincial governments and to all of our school systems.

Blog, 2010

## ***TRANSITIONING TO LIFE AFTER SECONDARY SCHOOL***

***As the new school year begins***, it is useful for families and teachers to think about how to make the best of the high school year, especially if this is the final secondary school year. Planning for the change from school to life beyond school should be a secondary school priority.

***Teacher and family planning*** for transition to life after secondary school for students experiencing disability has been a difficult and frustrating process in many instances. To understand this difficult reality and to contribute to creating positive transition planning, the Marsha Forest Centre undertook a study of the planning situation. We interviewed teachers, parents, and students who had experienced transition planning or were now involved in it. As I describe the study and its findings, I will insert comments made by teachers, parents, and students about their experiences and about the book, *Planning for Real Life After School: Ways for Families and Teachers to Plan for Students Experiencing Significant Challenge*, that resulted from our study. People First Ontario and the Canadian Ability Foundation were our partners, and Inclusion Press of Toronto assisted us in publishing and distributing the book.

***Our overall finding*** was that, whereas a few secondary schools and families collaborated closely on planning, this was not the experience of most. As transition from secondary school is the doorway to adult life in the community, the lack of collaborative planning was disturbing.

***From what we were told*** during the interviews, it seemed that families and teachers did not work well together because they did not understand each other's viewpoints. This was the root of the problems we found. They were not a team working together on this important process.

***Few parents felt*** they had any significant participation role. Some were not aware of, or kept informed of, planning. Some were more fortunate in their relationship with the school. Many found the experience negative. Here are a few statements by parents.

- *What is the transition planning process? I have never heard of it.*
- *We have been doing transition planning for high school since my son was in Grade 10. He is 18 now.*
- *I attend the IEP meetings, but I don't say much because they are talking about things I don't understand.*
- *Our school connected us to Community Living to make links before graduation.*
- *I have had no contact at school. There is no parent role.*

***Teachers tended to be optimistic*** regarding the transition planning process, at least from the school's perspective. Various teacher comments indicated that many, but not all parents, were not heavily involved in planning. Most teachers appeared to approach transition planning as their responsibility and to be carried through with only modest family involvement.

- The Special Education Teacher (SERT) who has the student takes the lead hand in coordinating everything.
- It would have to be a collaborative thing with the SERT and student and sometimes the parent to plan the next step after high school.
- There are meetings throughout the year where we meet again with parents and students and we discuss how things are going.
- I think, too, that part with the parents is that we need to get them involved earlier. They need a vision.
- The school that I am at now has a Co-operative Education Program, but it is at a university/college level. So I feel that leaves out a whole segment of our student population who would really benefit from Co-operative Education.

*We had planned* to write a resource manual that would be like a recipe book for collaborative transition planning. After our interviews, we decided that we had to go back quite a few steps. It was not safe to assume that schools and families had the background to work collaboratively. There was no deliberate plan for teachers to exclude family members and no intention by parents to take responsibility away from teachers. However, there was troublesome mutual misunderstanding in many situations. We needed to describe the ingredients for positive transition planning before we got to trying out the recipe.

*We then set about trying* to explain the reality of the school situation to the families, and the reality of the family situation to the schools. We put what teachers, parents, and students told us into the book. In fact, we ended up with two versions of the book. One was written at a high school level. The second was written in a plain language format at an elementary level for anyone whose reading skills were modest. We wanted to make certain that our readers would understand us, particularly in the case of students, but also for families whose first language was not English .

*The set of books includes* descriptions of the situation of schools and families. It also contains a description of a collaborative family-school workshop preparing families and students for transition. Recommendations drawn from what families and teachers told us, and description of person-centered planning strategies that have proven their value in planning for the future of persons experiencing disabilities completed the book.

*The last thing we did* was to send a draft of the book to all teachers, parents, and students we interviewed. We wanted to use their feedback to evaluate the books and revise them as necessary. We wanted to ensure that those we interviewed had significant input at all levels of what we were doing. Minimal revision was called for. Feedback from teachers, parents, and students was strongly positive with regard to the contribution made by the books.

Typical feedback comments from teachers and families are given below.

### ***Teachers:***

- You were fair to teachers and how schools are organized. Few resources I have seen have attempted to explain major players to each other.
- What a surprise! I never thought of things this way. But you're right, schools/teachers look at things differently.
- Thanks for a clear explanation. This is a very good document and should be used as a guide to everyone who is involved in the planning for students.
- This was sort of new territory for me. I really got something out of it. I think my relationship with parents will be strengthened.
- I found this fascinating. I have never really thought about the family context. It was more a matter of trying to get the family to agree with what we suggested. Now I see that this is not the big picture view.

### ***Families:***

- This manual takes a different approach to anything I have seen. The idea of explaining teachers to parents and parents to teachers sets up a nice discussion and prepares the move to collaboration and person centered planning effectively. Overall, it seems to be a contribution both to practice and to understanding the impact of disability on educators and families.
- This is an invaluable document for lots of parents. I enjoyed reading it and agree with most of the recommendations. I hope that some teachers will read it and begin to be more flexible and creative.
- This would be great for parents if teachers knew about it. I got no help from school for planning. But this guide is really good. (Student response)
- The manual is clearly written and is VERY informative. You point out many things that I was not aware of, so I was pleasantly surprised. Thanks for not using all those teacher words – they are so annoying!
- I found this informative. I had never really thought through all the limitations around what teachers do. Next time I speak to a teacher, it will be with a different understanding.
- You pointed out the obvious. But it was only obvious AFTER I read it!
- I was surprised that teachers don't look at things the same as the rest of us. But my mom said that they have other things to think about as well, so they see things a bit different than us. (Student response)
- We had a very bad experience in the planning process. Your description of the parent's approach and different perspective is very important. As a family you definitely see the whole process in a very different way. I'm glad some people understand this.
- This is right on. I could understand all of this and it's just the way our families look at these things. (Student response)

***Complimentary copies*** were then sent to all who participated in the study and to every English language school system in Canada, as well as to various advocate and other support groups. A number of school systems across Canada have asked for additional

copies of the book so that all their teachers involved in transition planning can benefit from the results of our study. Contact the Marsha Forest Centre and Inclusion Press at [inclusion.com](http://inclusion.com).

***Please note:*** A funding contribution by the Government of Canada Social Development Partnerships Program, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada assisted us with this project.

Blog, 2010

## ***GOVERNMENT, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, & CONFUSION***

*Inclusive education represents fundamental reform* in the global education system. For the first time, under United Nations leadership, education is seen as a right of all learners. It is only since the formation of the UN that education has been considered at the global level, and that action has been taken with regard to human rights. Polat and Kisanj (2009) and the global report, *Better Education For All* (2009), of Inclusion International provide synopses, with specific reference to disability, of UN level statements advocating universal access to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 laid out the general global and personal rights of citizens anywhere in our world. Article 26 dealt with securing basic education for all. The Universal Declaration was followed by the European Convention on Human Rights (1<sup>st</sup> Protocol, 1952), the 1996 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the World Programme Action Concerning Disabled Persons (1982), the Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education For All, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education of 1994, the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), Millenium Development Goals (2000), the EFA Flagship *The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities* (2001), *The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities: Toward Inclusion*, and, most recently, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and its Article 24 on education.

*This lengthy series* of conventions, declarations, and similar statements indicate consistent concern by world level organizations with universal education as a human right. Concern that education begin at an early age characterized all these statements. It is obvious, given the World Programme for Action Concerning Disabled Persons, the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, the Salamanca Statement, the EFA Flagship *The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities* and, lastly, Article 24 of the recent Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: *Towards Inclusion* that disability that particular concern was directed to persons experiencing disabilities.

*The early general thrust of UN policy* and effort relative to disability and education may best be seen in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (pp. viii-ix, 2).

We believe and proclaim that:

- Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning
- Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs
- Education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs
- Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting their needs

- Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

***The Salamanca Conference*** *high-lighted* the particular challenge of disability to the education community while embedding disability and education in the larger concept of Education for All (EFA).

***It was shortly before the Salamanca meeting*** that the term “inclusive education” was first used with regard to educating children experiencing disabilities. “In July 1988 a group of 14 people from North America who were concerned about the slow progress of integration barnstormed around a table at Frontier College, Toronto, Canada and came up with the concept of inclusion to describe better the process of placing children and adults with disabilities or learning difficulties in the mainstream” (Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). For some years those learners experiencing disabilities formed the single group to whom “inclusive education” was applied.

***Usage of the term*** with this target group in mind sped quickly. The previous statements of positive UN policy noted earlier have reinforced the particular concern when education and disability is the issue. There is no doubt but that the nexus of education and disability is considered of major importance under EFA. The definition of inclusive education as it relates to disability, at a time when usage of the term has spread to cover a variety of other groups also denied access to the regular education system, is the point at issue in the present discussion.

***As noted***, though learners experiencing disabilities commonly were viewed as the bedrock of the inclusion discussion in earlier years, this perception has changed. The focus has shifted from the solitary group of those experiencing disability to the multiple group of all those excluded from education systems around the world. Examples are the girl child, the orphan child, the ethnic child, the working child, the impoverished child and so on. There is no doubt that this is in keeping with UN policy and responsibility alluded to in the phrase Education for All. Booth (2005), Ainscow and Booth (2003), and others have described Inclusive Education as “concerned with over-coming barriers to participation that may be experienced by any pupil... It is a never-ending process...dependent on continuous pedagogical and organizational development within the mainstream. This view has been referred to in the literature as the “broad” view while focusing on the group experiencing disabilities has been nominated the “narrow” view.

***To us, this shift*** from a single to a multiple group focus is salutary. Every child, under any group designation, has an equal and irrevocable right to education. As stated by UNESCO in the Open File (Miles, 2005), “Inclusion starts from the belief that the right to education is a basic human right and the foundation of a more just society”.

*Nonetheless*, the shift has deepened confusion already existing around the meaning of inclusive education. The confusion arises from a number of sources. As mentioned, at an earlier period the term was generally understood to apply to learners experiencing disabilities. A great many people and organizations, and even governments, particularly those governments with long-standing and sophisticated special education systems, continue to use the term to signify education the group of learners experiencing disabilities.

Thought piece, 2011

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## ***THE INS AND OUTS OF DISABILITY AND EDUCATION***

**I have been wondering** for some time about the often-strained relationships between schools and parents when it comes to choosing the special education approach or the inclusive approach to disability and education. The special education approach is based on a range of placement settings in response to the needs of students experiencing various types and degrees of disability. Each placement is further and further away from the regular classroom and the other kids. This means some students will be in regular classrooms on a full-time basis, others will have their school day split between regular and special classrooms, others will spend the full day in special classes, and still others will be in special schools. Under this model a student can be moved to a more segregated placement if the academic or social achievement of the student is considered to drop.

***The inclusive education approach*** believes all learners, regardless of type and degree of disability, should be educated in regular classroom settings. Under this approach the regular classroom is the student's permanent home and supports are delivered there through a team of regular class teachers, special education teachers, and educational assistants. Other specialists, if needed, provide their services in, or as close as possible, to the regular classroom. A student is not moved from the regular classroom setting on the basis of academic and social achievement. The special education model has been with us since the 1960's. It has close links to the medical and psycho-educational models. Inclusive education is the new kid on the education block. It reflects United Nations educational policy that every learner has the right to placement in the regular classes of neighbourhood schools.

**There is something** about people's response to inclusion that bothers me. The people of whom I am thinking are the increasing number of parents who want their children to be educated in regular classrooms, and the large number of educators who see a range of segregated special education placements as more appropriate. In too many instances the relationship of educators and parents has been one of "does not play well with others". That is a tragedy when the education of any learner is at stake.

***These two groups, parents and educators,*** are key in reaching a decision on school placement. As education is a government matter, such educational decisions are guided by government legislation and regulations. Prevailing Canadian provincial and territorial government policy on reaching a decision on placement is that educators and parents collaborate. For instance, the Ontario Ministry of Education follows a three point policy: a) Under regulation 181/98 the regular classroom is to be considered as the placement of first choice for all students, b), if the school system believes that the regular classroom would meet the student's needs and c), if the placement is in keeping with parental wishes. In the case of British Columbia, the policy is much the same, except that parents are offered a consultation regarding the school system's choice, during which they may express their choice.

***It is clear*** in both jurisdictions that the preference is for regular classroom placement. The wrench in the works is that the government allows segregated placement

if that is judged by schools to meet student needs more appropriately than regular classroom placement. There also appears to be allowance for parental input. Most Canadian educational jurisdictions, but not all, follow similar processes. However, New Brunswick, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut have elected the inclusive model. Regular classroom placement with needed support is automatic.

*This latter policy* is in keeping with the recently passed United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention states that regular classroom settings are the right of all learners, and, specifically, of those experiencing disabilities. The position of the United Nations is that the regular classroom is the most effective and efficient setting for the realization of equity, social justice, and the strongest learning for all. Canada has signed and ratified the Convention.

*Why, then,* do the majority of Canadian educational jurisdictions continue to support segregated educational placement for learners experiencing disabilities and, often, do not limit this to exceptional cases? Many educators, and some parents, are very comfortable with the special education model. They are familiar with the model. They believe segregated placements to be the most effective choice for many learners. That strong support for segregation continues is apparent in the fact that the Toronto District School Board, the largest school system in Canada, recently announced that its model for the future of education for learners experiencing disabilities would remain the special education model. The Board states that this decision offers choice to families. Considerable confusion enters the picture when one realizes that the Toronto Board and many other school systems across Canada describe the range of special education placements as "inclusive" or "inclusionary" and avoid the term "segregated". This seems to be one of those "having your cake and eating it, too" situations for the school systems.

*Given that many parents* prefer the inclusive education model whereas their schools work on the basis of the special education model, one might expect that disagreements between families and schools will occur. Far too many disputes do occur. In some cases the disputes go the level of the courts before a final decision is made. In the instance of disagreement, experience indicates that schools have the real power in deciding on placement. Parents may disagree with the decision and may invoke an appeal process, but most often they are unable to change the decision.

*Why does this situation* of inviting disputes between parents and schools exist? My view is that the problem is lodged, not in some natural animosity between schools and families, but in the wishy-washy educational policies of some Canadian governments. If governments did not provide loophole clauses for segregated settings in their regulations and if they strongly supported preference for the regular classroom as first choice, there would be little disagreement. Schools would have a clear guide and would set about following it. They might have qualms, but they would do their best to implement inclusion, as have educators in other jurisdictions. However, existing ambivalent policies create a situation that brings schools and families into conflict. On the one hand, they state preference for the regular classroom as first choice for all learners. On the other, they dangle the carrot of segregated special education placements

by developing regulations that open up the door to such placement. At the same time, they give parents an apparent say in the placement decision. One cannot think of a situation more likely to result in disagreement between many schools and families.

*In these disagreements* the school is in a much stronger position than is the family. The school controls all the resources necessary for the education of any learner. The government has given schools the right to decide placement for learners experiencing disabilities on the basis of academic and social achievement. Given that schools have traditionally considered level of academic and social achievement of many students experiencing disabilities as inappropriate for regular classroom settings, and that segregated settings do the job better, it is no wonder that many schools turn to segregated placements when they have the option. This option solves a problem for schools and allows them to continue with policies with which they have experience. It does not solve the problem for parents. If parents disagree, and the school does not change its position, parents may turn to a series of quasi-legal steps of appeal. In this situation, the school has access to resources necessary to hire the best legal advice possible. It also is not pressed for time in resolving disputes. Parents, however, must pay their own way. They also are pressed for time in obtaining the strongest possible education for their children. Guess who wins most disputes?

*What bothers me* is that all of this setting of educators and families at odds is unnecessary. Government policy places the school in a stronger position than that of the parents. Educators who are accustomed to considering learners experiencing disabilities through a certain lens and then are granted the right of using that lens, are not being nasty. They are following the rules as laid down by their governments. They accept the policies and develop tools to enforce those policies. Change, however, is occurring elsewhere. Just today I had a note from a friend, Bettina, in Germany. The note read, "Things seem to develop in Germany thanks to the UN-Konvention. The Ministry of Education called to ask if I will work on a plan for Inklusion for North-Rhine-Westphalia". Our school systems supporting the special education approach simply are doing what government allows them to do. Other school systems are moving toward international policy. It is the lack of progressive government policies that is at the root of the problem facing Canadian schools and Canadian families.

*In terms of rights and social justice*, the solution is easily apparent. New Brunswick, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and various individual school systems across Canada have seen the solution. The UN and its agencies have seen the solution. Many other nations have seen the solution and are transitioning from the special education model to inclusion. In addition, research on academic and social achievement of learners experiencing disabilities increasingly points out that regular classroom placement is superior to segregated placement.

*When will the balance* of Canadian governments act on the solution that is so apparent in other parts of Canada and in an increasing number of nations around the globe?

Blog, January 2011

## ***DISABILITY & STUDENT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION***

***Canadian society in general*** and the education system in particular do not appear aware that inclusive education is good for the health of persons experiencing disabilities. In my view, the school system approaches education and disability as a problem of “fitting in” academically and behaviourally. Fitting in is so valued by educators that many learners experiencing disabilities continue to be placed in segregated special education settings on a full or part-time basis. They are not seen as not learning in regular classes and as not benefiting from being educated with their typical peers. In popular educational thought segregation is what will benefit these students. It is believed that they will learn more strongly in the company of others about whose learning teachers have concerns. For instance, it is believed that learners with intellectual concerns will learn better when with other learners who share these concerns. Likewise, learners with behavioural or other concerns will learn better and behave better when educated with similar peers instead of mainstream students.

***These beliefs run counter*** to common sense and the increasing strength of research and teacher experience that prove the opposite. Students experiencing disabilities do better academically and socially when educated with their typical peers, and less well when educated in segregated settings. This point, especially as it applied to learners experiencing intellectual concern, was emphasized by Susan Hall, Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission in a presentation to educators and trustees at a recent Ontario Ministry of Education conference. She made no bones about it. She stated that many educators continue to support segregation when they know there is a stronger answer. Another incorrect belief is that the learning of other students will be lessened by the presence of learners experiencing disabilities. Again, research and experience prove that the learning of the typical peers is not lessened by well-designed inclusion. In fact, there is evidence that these students are learning lessons about themselves and humanity not taught in their textbooks.

***These incorrect, but convenient, beliefs,*** however, are not the most significant reason for change to inclusion of all learners in the regular classrooms of any school. Academic learning is not the most significant aspect of choosing special education and segregation for many or inclusive education. The most important point is that all learners are healthier when they learn with a diverse set of others and develop social networks.

***Solid links have been made*** between learning with their typical peers and the health of learners with disabilities. Acquaintance and friendship with a variety of others means social capital, acceptance by others, for all children. Halton, Kandyce, and Russ in the Healthcare Quarterly of 2010 remarked on the “explosion” of interest around the concept of social capital saying that valued resources lie within and are by-products of social relationships. They go on to note “Social relationships also impact health and are included in social determinants frameworks through constructions such as social cohesion, social support and social exclusion”.

***In any comparison*** of the special education and inclusive education models, two differences stand out. Social cohesion and the development of social support networks is connected to inclusive education and interaction with typical peers, whereas special education is characterized by distancing from the typical peer group and impoverished social networks. There is little opportunity to develop social capital unless one is among one's typical peers.

***Underwood*** (2004) of Ryerson University in outlining a case for inclusive education as a determinant of health states:

*The benefits of inclusion evident in the educational research are improved teaching, and better academic, social and behavioural outcomes. These benefits logically provide other benefits outside of school. These include access to better jobs, and thus income and food security and reduced poverty, as well as access to social networks through school and work and thus better housing, reduced risk of violence and increased access to health care.*

***This beneficial domino effect*** of inclusive education has been recognized by the United Nations in its calls for inclusion of learners experiencing disabilities in community schools. Even before this positive UN policy was formulated, at a 1989 Toronto meeting convened by the Marsha Forest Centre, a group sat down to consider how to find a stronger social response than the special education model to meet the academic and social needs of learners identified with disabilities. By the end of the evening, the term "inclusion" had been introduced and agreed on as a way to signal, with particular reference to the role of education, an equitable position in society for all. The concept of "inclusive education" now has spread around the globe. Though some use the term rhetorically as a theoretical or attitudinal concept not calling for regular classroom placement for all, others have realized the importance of regular classroom membership. They know that practice can follow theory, because they are doing it.

***Society can change*** for the better. International research increasingly is documenting that education under the special education model not only causes social isolation, but also does not result in the levels of academic achievement possible through inclusive experience. There is negative impact on the health of this group of learners. Around the globe, for example in places such as India, Malta, Italy, Croatia, and parts of Canada, governments and educators are moving toward inclusive education because they see the benefits for all.

***Unfortunately,*** not nearly all governments and educators are willing to change from past practices. The kindest explanation is that they are unaware of the benefits of inclusive education. How this can be possible, given the growing research and experience documenting benefits of inclusion, is difficult to understand though. A less kind possibility is that governments and education systems prefer the status quo to the effort required to put more progressive policies and practice in place.

Blog, April 2011

## ***A LESSON PLAN FOR BELONGING: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IMPARTS MORE THAN JUST THE CURRICULUM***

*A sense of belonging* is something that all of us want and need. We want to be surrounded by those who love us, by friends, and by the members of our larger community. Our family, of course, is the closest to us. They are the first who love us and give us an unconditional sense of belonging. But there is more to belonging than the family. To feel complete and accepted we must be a part of the larger community. We need friends who care for us just because they like us. Without a circle of friends we feel incomplete. There is an emptiness that a family alone cannot fulfill. Not to be accepted, not to be included as a member of the wider community, means a life of loneliness and pain for which there is no cure. Society has known about the negative effects of loneliness for many years. Many medical and sociological studies have documented and re-documented the negative effects of loneliness. Mother Teresa may have understood these effects intuitively. She once said, "Loneliness is the most terrible poverty".

*David Pitonyak commented* on the connection of disability and loneliness in his January, 2010 paper "*The Importance of Belonging*". He emphasized that many people experiencing disabilities live lives of extreme loneliness and isolation. Many depend almost exclusively on their families for companionship. Some have lost their families and turn to their care workers for support and a sense of belonging. Since support workers come and go in one's life, the resulting social emptiness can be devastating. This is what happens for too many people experiencing disabilities for whom finding good friends has been a lifelong challenge.

*Our circle of friends*, especially when we are young, is made when we enter school. Next to the family, school is the most important agent of society in determining whether you develop a sense of belonging to your community. School teaches us more about how our society works and how to get along with each other than does anything else. Teachers believe that students go to school to learn. Children know they go to school to make friends. School is where we all first develop our sense that we belong to the larger community beyond our family. It is not unusual to have good friends we met in school as part of our lives.

*I say "all" above*, but the school system does not have a strong record for creating a sense of belonging for many young people who happen to experience disability. Unfortunately, the way our schools tend to operate makes outsiders of many young people experiencing disabilities. Learners with disabilities are held at arm's length by most school systems. To me, this is not the fault of the teachers. Teachers have been taught in their professional preparation programs and by their teaching experiences that learners experiencing disabilities need special treatment, special teachers, special busses, special programs, educational assistants, and segregated environments in which to learn effectively. All of these are barriers to the development of friendships with other children. Though there are limited exceptions, most school systems model behaviour that convinces other students that their peers with disabilities are to be treated differently. Nothing on the above list of special supports works to create a sense of belonging to the

larger community. Everything on the list acts to create barriers between young learners experiencing disabilities and their potential friends. How do you develop a sense of belonging when your interaction with your typical peers is limited at a time when you need it to be maximized? How can you learn how your typical peers operate? How can they learn that you operate very much as they do?

***These are significant questions.*** Earlier I mentioned that David Pitonyak wrote of people experiencing disabilities who live lives of loneliness and isolation when they no longer have a family to which they belong. Once the family is gone, they become dependent on paid support workers. It is tragic that many come to see these workers as their friends because they have no one else. It is not the fault of the support workers. It is the fault of a society that distances its members from some people due to perceived differences.

***An answer may be found*** in school systems that bring all the youth of a community together in equity during their socially formative years. Educators practicing inclusive education have done away with most of the barriers to friendship and belonging that are common in school systems clinging to the special education model. This model may have been acceptable in the past when we felt it was the only possible answer. As our understanding of the dynamics of the special education approach and the values of educating all learners together have increased, we have learned that segregation in school has unfortunate and unnecessary results. We know that an inclusive approach which recognizes need for the optimum individual academic achievement for all students and also need for optimum social achievement as well, avoids many of these results. Taken together, the dynamics of inclusive education increase the potential for development of a strong sense of belonging in all students. Additionally, research is documenting the fact that learners experiencing disabilities reach higher academic and much higher social achievement levels when educated in inclusive settings. There also are spin-off benefits for the typical students. That is why the United Nations has turned to inclusion as a stronger response than that of the special education model in meeting the needs of all learners.

***My friend and colleague,*** Crystal Chin, who has physical challenge, describes her regular classroom experience as "present but not participating". She observed her typical peers interacting, becoming friends, and developing a sense of belonging in the classroom and to the school community. Crystal's experience was one of watching all this happening but not being part of it happening. Perhaps it is missing out on these earlier and continuing social experiences that lead to loneliness and isolation in later life. If one is placed in the role of observer rather than participant in equitable social interactions from an early age, perhaps a pattern is set for life.

***It would be unfair*** to suggest that early school experience is the only, or the major, determinant for development of a sense of belonging. However, it is not unfair to say that experience at school impacts all students. For most, that experience contributes to development of a sufficiently strong social network, and the social skills to

intermingle, to escape loneliness and isolation in later life. For others, particularly in the case of disability, the experience may be less successful.

*Almost all Canadian school systems* now claim to be inclusive. Some are, and good things are happening. Most continue to believe that some students cannot benefit from being educated with their typical peers. They continue to support special education structures and methods that, for most, do not lead to a sense of belonging. Ask people who have experienced special education if this is not their experience.

*It would improve many lives* if parents and others were to pressure politicians and others to move to inclusive education for all without playing word games. We know inclusion leads to a stronger sense of belonging to the school and to the larger community. If we start now, we can change the future.

Article, 2010

# Student Attitudes -- Making Friends, or Making Fun?

*Special Ed versus an Inclusive Approach in School*

*By Gary Bunch*

How do typical students feel about their peers with disabilities? Does it make a difference if they are in a school following the "special education" model or a school that is inclusive? Are friendships made, or are insults endured? Do typical students advocate for their peers with disabilities?

These questions motivated York University Faculty of Education researchers in Toronto to study attitudes of typical students toward peers with disabilities in schools with inclusive and special education structures. Which is more positive, the special education setting or the inclusive setting?

What happens academically is a big question. What happens socially is perhaps even bigger for students with disabilities.

Typical elementary and secondary students in two Ontario school systems, one with a special education model and one with an inclusive model, took part in the study. A total of 51 students in grades one, three, five, seven, nine, eleven and OAC were asked about relationships between peers with and without disabilities in terms of friendships, discriminatory behaviour and advocacy.

Friendships was a revealing area. Elementary-level typical peers in special education model schools tended to know, or know of, one or more students with exceptional needs. Some friendships existed, almost all in the earliest grades. As Bert, grade one, said: "Dave is one of my friends."

However, friendships were the exception. A basic special education principle is that it is academically and socially better to separate certain students from the mainstream. When grade-five student Brian was asked if peers with disabilities were in his class, he responded, "Not in my class." Though typical students knew that some students with disabilities were in their schools and might even know the name of a peer with a disability, friendships were uncommon.

The reverse was the case in the inclusive elementary school studied. The majority of students interviewed had friends with disabilities.

"...Because she's with us. So we consider her as our friend, and she considers us her friends." (Kim, grade seven)

This pattern between schools was repeated at the secondary level. Students' comments suggested that their school's special class separated students with disabilities both physically and socially. Ken in OAC commented:

"For sure, most of their friends are within the [special] classroom. Everyone knows who the special people are, and they'll talk to them if they approach them and there's a conversation or something. But I think most of their friends are within the [special] classroom."

No secondary student claimed friendship with any peer with a disability. They saw students with disabilities in the school, but had only a remote acquaintance with them.

Typical students in the inclusive model secondary school routinely referred to friendships with peers with disabilities. As Marilyn in grade nine said:

"Yeah. A lot of people talk to him. Like, when I come in, I say hi to him all the time. And other people talk to him. Like, the guys talk to him... He's like everyone else."

When we switched our focus to whether teasing and insulting behaviour are part of social life between typical students and students with disabilities, a second area of difference was found. Discriminatory behaviour existed in both special education and inclusive model schools, though with different frequency.

In the special education model elementary schools, many students, particularly in the earliest grades, reported no teasing and insulting. Brian, grade five, when asked if such behaviour went on, responded, "No. Everybody's a human being." However, some inappropriate behaviour does occur. Dawn, and Diane, grade seven, and Lorne, grade five, reported that some students made fun of peers with disabilities and called them names.

Almost no mention of teasing and insulting behaviour was made by elementary students in the inclusive system.

A different picture emerged at the secondary level, most particularly in the case of the special education model school. Ray, in grade 10, described some peers teasing students with disabilities. Tormenters liked "to see how they [peers with disabilities] react... They talk to them and say things to see how they react." Owen, in OAC, recalled non-disabled students saying to a student with disability, "Go ask that girl out. She likes you," simply to laugh at the girl's reaction.

Again, although a degree of discriminatory behaviour was apparent in the inclusive model secondary school, fewer instances were noted. The majority of students offered comments such as:

"We don't have the nicest people here, but I have never heard anyone say anything...I would speak out against any derogatory words. I don't tolerate that. It's not in my nature." (Francis, OAC)

However, this did not mean that nothing occurred. Barb, OAC, was aware of occasional inappropriate behaviour.

"I think all kids at one point probably don't understand it and then they react by making fun of them and stuff. I definitely feel against it. I would be completely against it."

The picture changed between the earliest years and secondary school. In the earliest grades, minimal teasing and insulting behaviour was reported. In later elementary grades, discriminatory behaviour was noted, with more occurring in special education school settings. By the secondary level, it was clear that inappropriate behaviour toward peers with disabilities occurs when a special class is a part of the school. Teasing and insulting occurred in the inclusive secondary school, but with much less frequency.

How about the issue of advocacy? Do typical peers advocate for peers with disabilities? As discriminatory behaviour occurred at some level in both inclusive and special education school systems, interviewees were asked if they would intervene in the face of harassment of peers with disabilities.

Responses in special education model schools indicated that, whereas some might intervene and advocate, most would not.

"Some of my friends make fun of people, but I just tell them it's not nice. I don't want to be part of it." (Alex, grade seven)

"Well, Greg knows that he's made fun of terribly...I just don't get in the way. I just try not to say anything." (Dawn, grade seven)

Secondary students in both school systems were aware of discriminatory behaviour, and it was a

significant reality in the special education setting. The majority of typical students interviewed stated they would intervene and advocate for their peers with disabilities. The response of Jane, grade nine, was typical. "Yeah, like, I mean, although I've seen a lot of people insulting them and doing all kinds of stuff to them, but usually I try to stop it." Some others, when noting discriminatory behaviour, told us they would elect not to advocate. As Owen, OAC, said, "Sometimes I sort of feel like it, but I never acted on it."

In inclusive secondary settings, students responded much as did their peers in the special education model secondary school, except that all students indicated advocacy would be their response. Karl, grade 11, was typical. "I could try to correct them. Some people might call them retards or something, and that's wrong."

Other responses suggested that the students in the inclusive setting were trying to understand why discriminatory behaviour existed and what might be done about it.

"And the ones who laugh at them, they're just immature." (Rose, grade 11)

"Other kids don't know enough about him. They're not educated that way. We could educate other people." (Karl, grade 11)

Two findings are of interest here. The first is that students are aware of when peers with disabilities are being tormented and recognize the unfairness. The majority would actively intervene and advocate for peers. Others would walk away without doing anything. The second point of interest is that all inclusive-setting secondary students would intervene in some way. Some even suggest possible sources of discriminatory behaviour and how to work to eliminate them.

This overall discussion of the three issues related to social relationships between typical students and their peers with disabilities is based only on this one study and a modest number of students. Caution must be used in generalizing results. More studies are needed to test whether similar patterns are found in other schools. The questions underlying this study are simply too important to rely on one study.

Given that caution, findings support inclusive structures more so than they support special education structures in schools. More friendships were reported at elementary and secondary levels. Less inappropriate behaviour was mentioned. Typical students in both system types recognize the unfairness of peers with disabilities being tormented, but some, particularly in the special education situation, would not intervene.

If one accepts that students in the two systems are simply people who have no inherent bias against peers with disabilities, one must ask what causes the differing relationships. Could it be, at least in part, that the way the two systems are structured creates the differences?

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