

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – THE BASICS – The Writer’s Perspective

Note: This is the first of a series of brief blogs/videos based on the experiences of Gary Bunch and Jack Pearpoint of the Marsha Forest Centre in Toronto, Canada. In these we present what we consider to be crucial information of the social justice and student rights aspect of Inclusive Education. We also address a variety of aspects of the methodologies we believe useful for teachers who wish to practice Inclusive Education in their schools. Our most basic belief is that schools can include all students, those with and without disabilities in the same classrooms. This may take some time to accomplish, but without having this end objective for your teaching, you are not practicing Inclusive Education.

Introduction

Inclusive Education for students with disability remains poorly understood, both in 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. O’Brien and Forest (2004) describe the genesis of the term Inclusive Education in Toronto, Canada in 1988. Furthermore, Inclusive Education for students with disability has been United Nations policy since 1994. In that year UNESCO convened a meeting of leading educators from around the globe in Salamanca, Spain to discuss the future of education for students 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. Specifically, UNESCO (1994) 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 capable of meeting their needs. Regular schools 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 school system.

In 2006 the United Nations declared the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and, in Article 24, repeated and strengthened its earlier policy on education for those with disabilities.

The Convention stated that:

- a. Persons with disabilities are not excluded from general education systems on the basis of disability or from the secondary system on the basis of disability.
- b. 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 Professional and Personal Perspectives

It is important at the beginning of this series of short considerations of aspects of Inclusive Education that I state 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 segregated 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, almost every student did not return to her/his home except for the summer and Christmas season holidays.

This was an example of rigid segregation of one group of students from other students on the basis of disability.

While associated with schools for deaf students, I continued my university studies through my Masters and Doctoral degrees. These studies widened my understanding of the broad area of exceptionality and education. They also led me to think beyond past practice and to question the emphasis on segregation of students with disabilities. When I became a senior administrator, I was able to reduce integration by initiating a daily school bus service for those students living within one hour of the school for the deaf. Many parents of younger students chose this service. Some of the older students opted for it as well, though many, particularly the older girls opted out. Within a short time, however, as the students brought back the benefits of living at home, every older student within a one hour range chose the bus service. Some parents moved to take advantage of the new service. This was an action which reversed the long-lasting policy of rigid segregation of the 3 residential schools for deaf students in Ontario and strengthened family bonds.

I state the above 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 within the existing policy. We were proud of our efforts. Nevertheless, policies are not written in stone and change does take place.

Eventually I left schools for the deaf to undertake Masters and Doctoral degrees at a university in the province of British Columbia. Achieving these objectives, I became a Professor at a university in the province of Saskatchewan. I extended my knowledge of education of other groups of students with disabilities. Then I accepted an invitation to York University in Toronto to take up a Professorship there.

At York I met others who felt a new approach to disability and education was needed. I worked with Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint and others with and without disabilities in the early development of the Inclusive Education approach. We discovered that we shared the same interest in moving from the traditional Special Education Model to a more socially fair method which took student rights into consideration. The move to the Inclusive Education Model took us in 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. I have also visited many nations to assist in advancing Inclusive Education.

One of my research studies was a study of what Canadians meant when they used terms such as Special Education and Inclusive Education. As noted at the beginning of this paper, there is considerable confusion regarding the differences between the Special Education and the Inclusive Education Models. I wished to study the different responses of various groups to the terms associated with these two models.

The study (Bunch, et al.) 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, such as a questionnaire, were used as well. The responses to our questions indicated that there was considerable confusion between Special Education and Inclusive Education among respondents. However, the respondents highlighted the basic differences between the two Models in their responses. The 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.

Aspects of this definition of Inclusive Education are used in the policies of various Canadian Provinces and Territories and are referred to as a guide in a variety of other nations.

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O'Brien, J. & Forest, M. (2004). *Action for Inclusion*. In G. Thomas, and M. Vaughn (Eds.) *Readings and Reflections*. Maidenhead, England, Open University Press.

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Marsha Forest Centre:

1- Series on Inclusive Education

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