

New Brunswick's journey to inclusive education

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Abstract

In 1994, when UNESCO adopted the Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action, it invited governments and non-governmental organizations to consider fundamental policy shifts to promote an inclusive education approach. This call to action resonated well with the efforts already being made by educators in New Brunswick. For more than 35 years, this small Canadian province has pioneered the concept of inclusive education through legislation and best practices. Today, as the international community is once again invited to promote inclusive and equitable education, this time for the UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development, it is timely to examine how the province's practices compare with these guidelines and what steps might be taken next. This article analyzes New Brunswick's path to inclusive schools, concluding that, despite visible progress, real change is a difficult process that requires long periods of sustained effort and collaboration from a variety of partners.

Keywords: New Brunswick; Inclusive education

In 2019, the international education community reflected on the 25 years since the Education for All initiative was proposed at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca (Ainscow, Slee, and Best 2019). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994) had been endorsed by 92 governments and 25 international organizations. Specifically, the Salamanca Statement called for inclusion to be the new norm, while the Framework for Action provided guidance for schools on accommodating all children within the regular educational system (UNESCO 1994). However, even 20 years later, most countries still struggled to answer UNESCO'S call for action and implement inclusive education (Ryan 2012). It was thought that by adopting new educational, social, and economic policies, ordinary schools would be transformed so that all children, including those with disabilities, could be taught in their local community schools. While many hoped the agreement in Salamanca would be the impetus needed to bring about change, it soon became clear that the challenge was far greater than had been anticipated.

Since education is one of the UN's main focuses of the 2030 global development agenda (UN 2016), and since many countries still face the challenges identified in Salamanca, it is timely to reflect on one Canadian province's experiences with inclusive education. While Canada does not have a federal or national system of education, provinces do operate under the provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as well as human rights legislation and international treaty obligations (Hutchinson and Specht 2019). They promote equity and commit to meeting all students' needs so they can reach their fullest potential. Across Canada, over 80 percent of students with special education needs spend 50 percent or more of their school day in regular classrooms with their peers (Specht, McGhie-Richmond, Loreman, Mirenda, Bennett, Gallaher, et al. 2016). While implementation remains a challenge, models of inclusive education to meet the needs of children with special needs are receiving increased attention and investment, and they have been identified as one of the top trends in Canadian Education (EdCan Network 2019).

However, even while encouraging inclusion, most provinces do not explicitly require it (Carr 2016). Various approaches to inclusive education have resulted in numerous pathways to the realization of that vision. While the Northwest Territories (2016) and more recently Nova Scotia (2019) have developed system-wide inclusion policies, setting out the principles and requirements to ensure all schools are inclusive, the province of New Brunswick (2013) is the jurisdiction furthest along the path to inclusion. We will examine the path New Brunswick followed to make schools inclusive and share insights that may inform initiatives in other jurisdictions.

Situated on the eastern coast of Canada, New Brunswick is one of the country's smallest provinces with a population just over 750,000 inhabitants, including Anglophones (64.8%), Francophones (32%), immigrants (4.6%), and members of the province's First Nations communities (4%) (Statistics Canada 2017). The school system includes separate sectors for French and English language groups, and most First Nations communities also have elementary schools. There are a few small cities in the province, such as Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John, but most of the population lives in small towns or the rural areas that surround them. In 2015, the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation ranked New Brunswick as the second most rural region of Canada.

In the last three decades, this small Canadian province has implemented a model of inclusive schooling for all students, including those previously served by special education programs (MacKay 2006; OECD 1995). Initial efforts by several regional education authorities to be inclusive resulted in New Brunswick taking its first official step towards inclusive education in 1986. The Legislature unanimously enacted Bill 85, a mandate for public schools to include all students within the public education system (Porter 1995). Bill 85 required that students with disabilities and other special needs be educated in community schools, in regular classes with their non-disabled peers. At the time, this was an unprecedented action in Canada that prompted many in the international community to take notice (OECD 1995). Thirty-five years later, New Brunswick is still considered a leader in the effort to make schools inclusive.

Based on a visit to Canada in 2019, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Catalina Devandas-Aguilar, provided the following assessment of progress toward inclusive schooling in New Brunswick in her End of Mission Statement:

I was extremely pleased to learn about the fully inclusive education system implemented in New Brunswick, which is one of the best in the world and a role model, where all children with disabilities attend regular schools and receive individualized support, irrespective of the level of their support needs, under a framework of universal design for learning (United Nations, 2019).

Several years prior to Devandas-Aguilar's report, the province's Ministry of Education also received international recognition for its work to support inclusion. In 2013, the province was awarded the UNESCO/Emir Jaber al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah Prize (UNESCO 2014), established to "Promote Quality Education for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities". The recognition noted the province's "long-standing commitment to a systemic approach to inclusive education for learners with disabilities and for its vision of education as a catalyst for social justice and equity". Also noted was a critical aspect of New Brunswick's efforts over the years, "the outstanding example of mentoring and professional learning for inclusive education, and a model of excellence in a public education system that has inspired other countries".(UNESCO, 2014). This recognition was echoed in 2016, when the World Future Council, in partnership with the Zero Project Organization, identified New Brunswick's Policy 322: Inclusive

Education as “an exemplary policy that breaks down barriers and contributes to building an inclusive society (Zero Project 2016).

As the international community continues to strive towards “equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all” (United Nations 2016), we next examine what can be learned from the experience in New Brunswick. What actions were taken that enabled schools to succeed? What challenges did the province face and how were they dealt with? We must step back to analyze the major elements contributing to New Brunswick’s progress toward an inclusive education system.

Meeting the challenge: Review, reflection, and action

To ensure the quality of the initiatives that flowed from Bill 85, the New Brunswick government has undertaken four major program reviews (New Brunswick Legislature: Special Committee on Social Policy Development 1990; Downey and Landry 1991; MacKay 2006; Porter and AuCoin 2012). In each, education officials were asked to reflect on the steps taken, the challenges remaining, and the path to improvement and greater success. Holding the implementation of the inclusion process up to critical analysis and evaluation has contributed to New Brunswick’s ongoing progress (Leblanc and Vienneau 2010). To that end, we will focus our analysis here on the two most recent reviews.

The Connecting Care and Challenge Report (MacKay 2006) was conducted 20 years after the passing of Bill 85, to determine how inclusion in New Brunswick schools was progressing and what might be done to enhance it. It was a thorough report, based on extensive consultation with educators and other stakeholders. Conducted by a highly regarded expert in education and human rights law, the report highlighted the need for clarity in the policies that guide school practice and recommended that stakeholders develop a consensus definition of inclusion. This would foster more effective allocation of resources as well as better school and classroom practices. One of the most consequential outcomes of the report was the development of a ministry definition of “inclusive education”, the product of several years of collaboration by a committee of stakeholders with diverse perspectives on the meaning of school inclusion. The “Definition of Inclusive Education” (Province of New Brunswick 2009) that emerged from the deliberations represented a significant step forward for the inclusion initiative in the province.

One significant and distinct element of the 2009 definition was the introduction of the term “common learning environment” (CLE). This new concept was developed intentionally to provide a more expansive perspective on what inclusive education might look like to its stakeholders. It helped dispel the misperception that inclusion is having every learner in a regular classroom all the time, no matter what the circumstances. It also clarified that inclusion is not just about students with disabilities; rather, it is about accommodating the variable and diverse needs of all learners (Baker-Korotkov 2020). It encouraged teachers to understand that all students are multifaceted in their strengths and challenges rather than one-dimensional learners. Inclusive schooling is for *all* learners, targeting personalized instruction that helps individuals learn both academically and social/emotionally alongside their peers. The 2006 report also led to the development of a strong human rights basis for inclusion in New Brunswick. The provincial human rights commission issued guidelines for educators and parents, establishing a criterion that would be used to resolve complaints based on access to or delivery of an inclusive education program (New Brunswick Human Rights Commission 2008).

While the 2006 review yielded recommendations at the systemic level, many felt the need for more focussed attention to support inclusion at the school and classroom level. The result was a government mandate for yet another review, which was completed six years later. The 2012 review focused on the practical actions that could be taken at the district, school, and classroom level to better support students and teachers. The process involved a thorough assessment of policy and practice in both the province’s Anglophone and Francophone school districts. More than thirty individuals— teachers, principals, and others— were involved in the research phase of the process. Approximately 20% of New Brunswick schools were visited, including those identified as having success with inclusion as well as those that were struggling. The report’s title, *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools* (Porter and AuCoin 2012), articulates the core finding of the report: that building capacity for inclusion can at the same time strengthen the school’s capacity to enhance learning success for all students.

Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools provided the impetus to build on the 2009 “Definition of Inclusive Education” and develop a comprehensive policy, “Policy 322: Inclusive Education” (Province of New Brunswick 2013). In addition to elements that emerged from educational

research (e.g., structures of collaboration, instruction, and learning), Policy 322 reflected strategies and practices (e.g., roles and responsibilities, personalized learning plans, and common learning environments) that had been developed in individual school districts in the province in previous decades. This was the first directive that provided clarity on programs and procedures to every public school in the province, in both the Anglophone and Francophone sectors.

The implementation of the report led to an “Action Plan” (Province of New Brunswick 2012) designed to strengthen inclusion. In addition to policy, the plan invested additional funds over a three-year period to increase support services for teachers and schools. To enhance school capacity, the number of support staff was increased while also making further investments in professional learning for principals, support teachers and other school personnel. The aim of Policy 322 was to ensure engagement among teachers, school leaders, and families, in order to “facilitate the full participation of all students, whatever their abilities or needs, in positive learning environments in all New Brunswick schools” (p. 1). The vision was and continues to be an evolving and systemic model of inclusive education, where all children reach their full learning potential and decisions are based on the evidence-based individual needs of the student.

Looking back at New Brunswick’s journey to inclusion, three critical principles reflect the core commitments of Bill 85 and Policy 322. These concepts have deep roots, not only in the mandate of the province’s educational law but in the results of the four formal policy reviews. They are also essential features of several UNESCO guidelines for inclusive education (UNESCO 1994; 2016).

Key principles for success

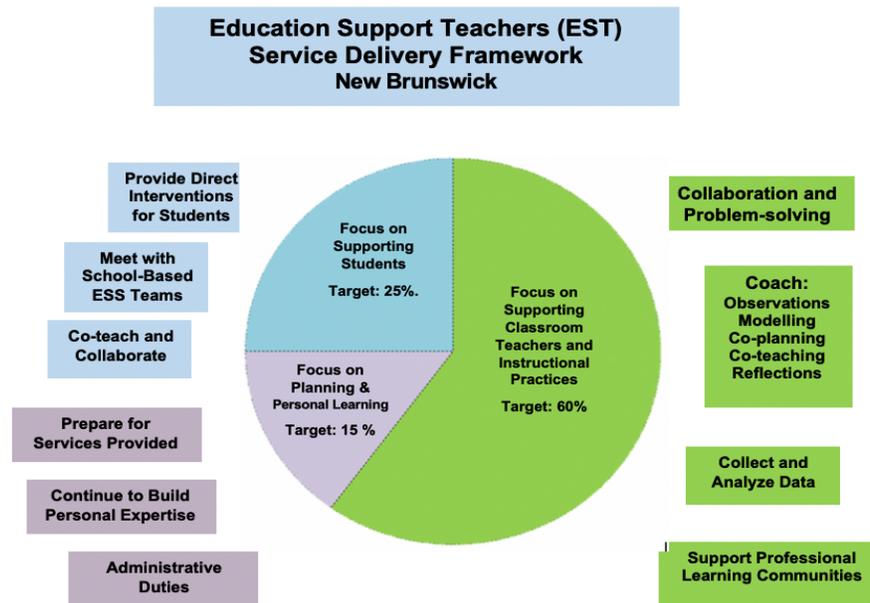
New Brunswick’s inclusion model is based on a commitment to provide each child an equitable and meaningful education. In the discussion that follows, we explore three of the most critical principles: leadership (Billingsley and Banks 2019), collaboration (Florian 2017; Zundans-Fraser and Bain 2015), and personalized instruction (Munoz and Porter 2018). We begin with a discussion of leadership, an element essential to the success of inclusive schools.

Leadership

Effective leadership is not only a requirement for achieving school success; it is a factor in bringing about any significant change in the education system (Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris, Leithwood, Gu, et al. 2009). New Brunswick schools have capitalized on this knowledge by developing two leadership models that have critically enhanced teachers' pedagogical methods and students' success. First, New Brunswick school leaders recognized that the role and title of resource teachers, whose responsibilities were primarily to work with small groups of learners in self-contained classes, needed to be revised (Porter 1991). The direct service to students they provided had to be transformed to an indirect model supporting teachers, since their former students were now in classrooms with their peers. Inclusion demanded a new model and in New Brunswick, the "support teacher" evolved from this need. Policy 322 reframed this role as the "Education Support Teacher" (EST), with a focus on a non-categorical collaborative approach that prioritizes supporting classroom teachers. Over time, many schools filled EST positions with those trained in inclusive education, as well as with experienced and highly effective classroom teachers who were successful in using inclusive practices themselves. All ESTs received thorough district-based training in the specific skills and practices most useful to successfully support classroom teachers. These included skills like consultation, coaching, co-teaching, and co-planning, all with a focus on peer support and problem-solving aimed at teacher and student success.

The need for ESTs to focus on supporting classroom teachers was formalized in Policy 322 by the designation of how they should target their time-use, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: New Brunswick Education Support Teacher - Time Use Targets (Province of New Brunswick 2014)



The time-allocations in Figure 1 were established as targets for an EST with the understanding that functions would vary over the school year (Porter and AuCoin 2013). A second model that emerged after the position of EST was implemented in schools is what Policy 322 called the school-based Education Support Services (ESS) team. While elements of makeup and function varied over time, the model that is currently used in New Brunswick schools was formalized as follows:

[A] team led by the school principal that assists classroom teachers to develop and implement instructional and/or management strategies and to coordinate support resources for students with diverse needs. In addition to school administrators, the team is made up of Education Support Teachers and other staff members whose primary role is to strengthen the school's capacity to ensure student learning. The membership of the school-based ESS team will be determined by the size, level and local context of the school. (p. 3)

These team members, both as a group and individually, respond to teachers' requests for assistance. They help with strategy development, support the implementation of instructional approaches,

and partner in problem-solving initiatives. Members of the ESS team include the principal, education support teachers with both resource and guidance counsellor responsibilities, and other professionals who assist teachers with specific challenges like behaviour and autism. The school principal is charged with ensuring that the individuals filling the EST positions are highly effective in their role. In the past, teams with diverse but complementary knowledge, skills, and experience have been particularly effective in New Brunswick schools (Porter and AuCoin 2012).

Another essential dimension of leadership is utilizing available resources most effectively to achieve the priority goals of the inclusion initiative. In New Brunswick, funding for support services is allocated on a “per-pupil” basis, according to the overall enrolment in the school and district. Since provincial legislation and policy do not fund special schools or special classes, this ensures that available financial resources are focused on supporting inclusion. Funding mechanisms are designed to deliver school-based support to teachers as they serve students with diverse needs in an inclusive school. Strategies that strengthen inclusion can also be seen to have a direct and positive impact on the school.

In a study on the interconnected frameworks of healthy and inclusive schools in New Brunswick, Baker-Korotkov (2020) found that strong leadership by the administrative team was critical to facilitating professional learning for staff and collaboration among staff members. Leaders ensure that schools have both the material and human resources they need to be successful. A leadership team that collaborates effectively with members of the school community increases the opportunities for sustained success. Let’s examine how the education system in New Brunswick has applied this key principle to its own journey towards inclusive education.

Collaboration

Building a collaborative school culture is a key element of the Salamanca Framework and a contributing factor to New Brunswick’s success with inclusive education (Baker-Korotkov 2020; Thériault 2017). Since most New Brunswick schools are in small towns and villages, teachers and principals have been able to build on strong parent and community ties to enhance school–community partnerships. In addition, close working relationships with business owners and organizations have helped facilitate

community placements for students as they transition to young adulthood (Bélanger and Gougeon 2009; Haché-Mallet 2019). Disability advocacy groups that serve children and their families have also proved to be reliable partners for teachers and students. One example is the “Transition to Work Program” operated by the New Brunswick Association for Community Living (NBACL) (2020). The program helps students with an intellectual disability become “workplace ready” by providing opportunities to learn job-related skills by creating a plan with an employment goal. The program assists students in finding work placements that best suit each student’s interests and goals, and also provides an opportunity to transition to work on the completion of schooling.

Partnerships are also important within the school itself. In addition to the relationship between the classroom teacher and the EST, whose role is “primarily to support the classroom teacher through coaching, co-teaching, co-planning instructional and intervention methodologies and consultation” (Porter and AuCoin 2012, p. 147), collaboration also takes place among regular classroom teachers. Peer support, to meet instructional and other classroom challenges, is also enabled in schools by using a collaborative team problem-solving process called “Teachers Helping Teachers” (Inclusive Education Canada 2014; Porter, Wilson, Kelly, and des Otter 1991). In this model, a teacher shares a problem with a small group of peers and a facilitator guides the team through a thirty-minute discussion, focused on developing possible strategies for the referring teacher. This provides an “effective way to link teachers together, build teamwork, engender a sense of teacher confidence and peer support” (Porter and Crawford, 2014, p. 2) and diminishes the need for external experts or specialists. This model is widely used in New Brunswick schools and in 2014, the Ministry of Education partnered with Inclusive Education Canada to develop an instructional video and module to train teachers to facilitate these sessions.

Peer support is also needed during the development of personalized learning plans for students (Leblanc 2011). Classroom teachers play a vital role in the process, but they are not on their own. They are supported by their peers as well as by ESTs, parents, and school administrators. Together, they work in partnership as they share examples of proven and effective practice. While welcoming the involvement of experts or external specialists when needed, they do not use a clinical or deficit-based approach.

The Action Plan (Province of New Brunswick 2012) launched following *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools* (Porter and AuCoin 2012) featured an innovative strategy to assist secondary principals in improving inclusion in their schools. High schools with similar demographics (student population, staff allocation, and community profile) but in different school districts were linked with two other schools to form a triad. Each “Triad Inclusion Team” (Province of New Brunswick 2012) was made up of 4 to 6 members and included the principal, one or two education support teachers, several classroom teachers, a school counsellor, and if possible, one or two other staff members. Each triad addressed inclusion issues by sharing both the strategies they found successful and the challenges they found most difficult (Thériault 2017). While each principal was given primary responsibility for selecting their team members, the ministry provided each triad with a facilitator, who developed a schedule and agenda in collaboration with the three principals. The teams collectively identified the specific topics and issues they would work on. Funding was provided for at least three team meetings during the school year, as well as for the travel and professional resources needed to support the process. Each school hosted the meetings on a rotating basis and the teams were supported to maintain contact and collaboration between meetings. Principals and the triad facilitators provided positive feedback on both the opportunity to partner with other schools and the practical sharing of strategies that strengthened inclusion in each school.

Since Bill 85 was passed in 1986, the Ministry of Education and regional school districts have made significant investments in inclusion, providing teachers with opportunities to share knowledge with their peers and to learn from external specialists or experts. Funding has been allocated for local school and district training, together with province-wide seminars and training events considered a priority by the ministry. New Brunswick educators have designed novel resources and approaches for professional learning while continuing to acquire external expertise where it was needed. Policy 322 has provided a framework for improvement and growth by directing school leaders to provide ongoing investments in professional growth and capacity building. In New Brunswick, collaboration and professional learning have been critical in ensuring that teachers get the support they need to make inclusion a success.

Personalized instruction

The Salamanca Framework rests on the assumption that all children can learn and that educational systems must be designed to accommodate each learner, irrespective of their diverse needs. Since 1986, the New Brunswick public school system has followed that approach. Bill 85 reversed the assumption that the need for accommodation meant a student must be separated from peers and taught in a special class, or in some cases, a special school. Instead, educators were directed to assume inclusion as the default, and to provide justification for a child's exclusion. Consequently, teachers had to develop instructional strategies that enabled the full participation of all students, including those with disabilities, in their classrooms.

Policy 322 strengthened that earlier legislative mandate by confirming that instruction be based on individual strengths and needs, not on the learner's individual deficits or challenges. Minimizing identified barriers to learning and providing a student with instruction in a common learning environment (CLE) was made a priority. The CLE concept was developed to provide a more expansive concept of school inclusion, one that assumes that students learn with peers in the mainstream classroom as well as in other areas of a school. For example, students may engage in learning activities in the library, common rooms, small open areas, or the school theatre. The concept also recognized that learning opportunities can occur outside the "bricks and mortar" of school buildings, with an eye towards utilizing community locations as places of learning. CLE also accommodates the more extensive use teachers make of online courses and virtual environments.

The Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) is New Brunswick's version of the more commonly used Individual Education Plan (IEP). Policy 322 defines it as

a plan for a student who requires specific and individual identification of practical strategies, goals, outcomes, targets and educational supports that ensure the student experiences success in learning that is meaningful and appropriate, considering the student's individual needs. (p. 3)

The PLP is based on the student's strengths and needs as well as the objectives of the curriculum. Policy 322 requires that the plan be developed by a planning team made up of a school administrator, one or more teachers, an education support teacher and, if appropriate, other members of the ESS team. Parents, the

student, educational assistants, and staff from community agencies providing services to the student may also participate, as required. The PLP is a living document and the policy calls for periodic evaluation and updates that consider changing circumstances.

In addition to the use of a PLP, New Brunswick schools have addressed the varying needs of students by using several instructional approaches to support inclusion. When Bill 85 was passed and specialized classes were closed, classroom teachers had to look for ways to bridge the gap between special education practices and regular education methods. Building on the work of Collicott (1991), New Brunswick educators implemented “Multi-Level Instruction” as one way to provide flexible instruction that could be individualized as needed for the newly included students. Taking into consideration students’ learning preferences and their zones of proximal development, multi-level instruction helped teachers to provide authentic and meaningful learning experiences for students in the inclusive classroom.

Experience using multi-level instruction and related strategies in New Brunswick schools paved the way for more widely known models such as “Differentiated Instruction” (Tomlinson 2017) and “Universal Design for Learning” (UDL) (Lord Nelson 2014; Novak 2016; Rao, Smith, and Lowrey 2017). UDL has been identified as one way to embrace all learners and to enhance inclusionary options for students, regardless of variability. Purposeful, up-front planning and curriculum design can enhance the academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and adaptive skill development and goals for all students. Teachers have accepted the vision that UDL-based curriculum is better able to address the needs of all learners (Baker-Korotkov 2020). The UDL model encourages educators to customize learning for each student’s strengths, needs, skills, and interests; in other words, it promotes personalized learning (CAST 2018). New Brunswick educators at all grade levels continue to engage in action research projects exploring the challenges and opportunities of implementing universal design for learning within an inclusive instructional environment.

While Policy 322 prioritizes using the common learning environment, it also recognizes that in some circumstances a school might need to consider an alternative for a student with a very exceptional need. Policy 322 calls this alternative a “variation on the common learning environment” (p. 8). While only needed by very few students, and often for very short periods, it is nonetheless a reality in specific

circumstances. However, the policy stipulates that any variation from the CLE must be based on a thorough and deliberative process. The school must demonstrate that every reasonable effort has been made to support and accommodate the student in the CLE. On the occasions that a “variation” is necessary, Policy 322 requires the Personal Learning Plan (PLP) to continuously monitor the student’s progress and ensure an early return to the CLE.

Assessing the results: How New Brunswick measures up

New Brunswick continues to strive toward building a more successful inclusive education system. At the same time, the province maintains a focus on students achieving global competencies in reading, mathematics, and scientific literacy. Despite some scholars’ concerns about the possible negative effects of a fully inclusive system (Forlin, Earle, Loreman, and Sharma 2011; Gokdere 2012), the evidence from New Brunswick suggests that it is possible for all learners to achieve at high levels in an inclusive school system. This has been made possible by anchoring the public education system in the commitment that all students can succeed (MacKay 2006). This commitment is enhanced when teachers seek out and use effective instructional strategies, where their effort is sustained by investments in professional learning and capacity building, as well as by meaningful collaboration among key stakeholders. New Brunswick’s results in academic achievement and student wellness have been positive.

Canada, as a nation, consistently performs in the top tier of countries in student achievement. Canadian students are consistently ranked in the top ten out of seventy-eight nations that participate in the OECD’s “Program for International Student Assessment” (PISA). PISA measures the competency of fifteen-year-olds in mathematics, science, and reading. If we consider New Brunswick a nation, an examination of 2015 PISA results (Council of Ministers of Education of Canada 2016; OECD 2015) reveals that students scored 7th in Reading, alongside Japan, Norway, France, and Sweden. In Science, New Brunswick ranked 10th along with countries such as Korea, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, and the United States. New Brunswick students also ranked 19th in Mathematics, near countries such as Germany, France, and Australia. These results support the assertion that student achievement at a high level is consistent and possible in an inclusive school system.

Another important dimension of school success is student health and well-being (AuCoin, Borri-Anadon, Huot, Ouellet, Richard, Rivest, and Saumure 2019; Ivcevic and Brackett 2014). As part of a multi-department partnership, New Brunswick children and youth take part in a wellness survey every three years (New Brunswick Health Council 2019). The survey examines student perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in areas related to personal well-being and consistently yields positive results. In 2019 specifically, 92 percent of youth reported a high level of connectedness. Additional data also revealed that 85 percent of youth have a high level of pro-social behavior with 81% of youth with a learning exceptionality or special education needs reporting the same. In examining healthy and inclusive schools in New Brunswick, Baker-Korotkov (2020) found that a sense of connectedness was foundational in schools that successfully implemented inclusive education. Finally, New Brunswick schools are highly successful in keeping students engaged and report a dropout rate of only 1.1 percent (Province of New Brunswick 2019).

Analysis

As the inclusion movement took shape in Canada several decades ago, Fullan (1991) observed that “[s]pecial education reform represents just about all the issues involved in bringing about educational reform” (p. 1). An expert on change in education, he went on to observe that:

Some of the key obstacles to reform include the problems of complexity, compatibility, capability, and lack of coordinated leadership. Special education reform reflects all of these problems. The solutions to inclusion are not easily achieved. It is complex both in the nature and degree of change required to identify and implement solutions that work.

(p. 1)

Our analysis of New Brunswick’s journey to inclusive education supports the view that an entire community of stakeholders and partners must be engaged to make inclusive education a success (Ainscow 2005; Carrington and Robinson 2006). This transition can take longer than originally anticipated and involves sustained effort by school administrators and teachers, as well as parents and students, to keep it

going. In New Brunswick, inclusion in schools has been a heated matter of public debate on more than a few occasions—as shown by the four formal reviews conducted since it began. The fact that New Brunswick’s neighbours, both in Atlantic Canada and New England, continue to use more traditional approaches to special education, including special classes and special schools, maintains awareness that there are alternatives to inclusion. Thus, during periods of debate, some voices characterize New Brunswick’s approach as being too radical (Benteau 1989; Brown 2020; Editorial Board 2001; Moszynsk 2006).

To address these concerns and determine the path forward, stakeholders have had to reflect on public priorities, renewing a shared vision of inclusive schooling while identifying the actions needed to move forward. Teamwork among stakeholder groups that bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the process has strengthened inclusive practices for New Brunswick’s students and schools. Thus far, this collaboration has continued to facilitate positive attitudinal changes among individuals and groups who have been skeptical about schools’ capacity to sustain inclusion. The public debates have inspired many stakeholders to deepen their collaboration and embrace the concept of inclusion with more confidence.

Partnership and collaboration among stakeholders at the community and provincial level are necessary to ensure that inclusion is embedded as an integral element of school culture and practice (Florian 2017; Zundans-Fraser and Bain 2015). In New Brunswick, success with inclusion at the individual school level has not been enough to produce system-level change. Fundamental changes in attitudes about diversity and equity are needed at all levels of society, if schools and the communities they serve are to be transformed and become truly inclusive (AuCoin and Vienneau 2015, 2019; Danforth 2017).

Initiating and sustaining inclusion in New Brunswick schools has been far removed from a top-down, expert-driven approach. Indeed, the experience in New Brunswick on the importance of broad partnerships in the process of making the transition to inclusion is consistent with the recommendation in the Salamanca Framework for collaboration. Instead, New Brunswick education’s three-decade evolution to inclusion has consistently engaged a full range of leaders. In the 1980s, this included a deputy minister, several school district officials, and a parent advocacy group. In the 1990s, it was extended to an increasing number of school principals and support teachers. In the 2000s, university faculty and classroom teachers,

including their professional associations, were prominent in voicing their support for inclusion. In the 2010s, few questioned whether New Brunswick should have an inclusive education system. There is broad consensus that the focus must be on how to strengthen and improve inclusive practices in schools and deal effectively with the challenges that continue to emerge.

This was confirmed by the last inclusive education review carried out in New Brunswick (Porter and AuCoin 2012), for which a broad spectrum of stakeholders was consulted. As with previous reviews, the findings were essential to the development of an action plan for moving forward (Province of New Brunswick 2012). The opportunity to engage in the review resulted in teachers and school administrators being committed to subsequent efforts to consolidate evidence-based practices and support them in ongoing professional learning. Educational leaders were able to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges that needed to be dealt with at the time, thus enabling them to plan improvements during the next phase of the process.

However, while a province-wide effort has been important to sustain system change in crucial periods, it is also critical for individual school communities, teachers, and parents to focus on the day-to-day, ongoing implementation of inclusive practices. Schools need to continuously examine their sense of purpose and strengthen their vision of how inclusion is an important reflection of community values. By doing so, they can develop the practical strategies needed to move further down the path. In New Brunswick, school strategies for inclusion were strengthened when they were clearly understood to be linked to general school improvement, benefiting all children. This was a key provision of Policy 322 and has the potential to sustain an inclusion model based not only on values and principles but on sound educational practices that benefit every student.

Conclusion

The analysis we have shared concludes that New Brunswick's history with inclusive education, especially with the mandate set out in Policy 322, has many key elements that are in line with the provisions of the Salamanca Framework. We have reviewed three of them: leadership, collaboration, and personalization. To successfully implement the principles of universality and personalization in schools

requires strong leadership and system-wide collaboration. In the end, collaborative teamwork by experienced and well-trained leaders and support staff are essential for teachers to succeed with a diverse student population. Even experienced classroom teachers require support, guidance, and coaching with specific pedagogy to do this. New Brunswick's Policy 322 builds on the broad goals articulated in the Salamanca Framework and contributes to achieving the desired result of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030: the participation of every child in an inclusive public education system.

Making an inclusive school a reality is work that is always evolving and is never fully accomplished. While our analysis has provided insight into the decades-long effort to make New Brunswick schools inclusive, the most important lesson is that the undertaking will need to be sustained. The changes that have occurred in New Brunswick schools in the years since Bill 85 became law have compelled teachers to successfully take up this challenge. The goals set out a quarter-century ago in the Salamanca Statement and Framework and in New Brunswick's Policy 322 both envision a future where ALL learners are included physically, socially, and, more importantly, pedagogically in their classrooms. To achieve this goal, educational leaders will need to continue doing what school leaders have done in this small Canadian province: involve the entire community in the process, celebrate best practices, and sustain the effort over the long term. The benefits of inclusion in schools for students, their families, and the community are well worth the effort.

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