

Inclusive Education Commentaries

sharing experience and knowledge



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION
FOR COMMUNITY LIVING

ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR
L'INTÉGRATION COMMUNAUTAIRE

Diversity includes. On se ressemble.

A Message from Gordon L. Porter

Inclusive Education Canada is pleased to share these six commentaries from individuals who work in Canadian schools, school districts and universities. They work every day with the real challenges of making schools inclusive. They are knowledgeable and committed educators who now play various roles in supporting students and teachers. In these short pieces they tackle some of the key issues and questions in the minds of their colleagues across the country.

We hope you will find this collection both interesting and helpful. Feel free to share this booklet with others and print a hard copy if that format better meets your needs.

If you have reactions, questions or comments on the commentaries, please share them with us on our Facebook page (Inclusive Education Canada).

Our thanks to each of our contributors.

On behalf of Inclusive Education Canada we offer our best wishes to teachers, principals and parents as the new school year gets underway.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon L. Porter', with a stylized, cursive script.

Gordon L. Porter, C.M., O.N.B
Director
Inclusive Education Canada

Turning a Corner

By Liz Baile, Northwest Territories

I was standing in the school's primary hallway, watching grade one students walk to the gym, when I noticed Clinton. He was the last student coming out of his class and lagged quite behind the others. As he turned the corner, he looked right at me and said with great joy, "I'm late for gym". As I watched Clinton with his stuffed husky dog named Mike, and without any adult by his side, I smiled and said, "But you're getting there!"

Back in my office, I thought back to where we were just a year ago with Clinton. So many challenges faced us as a school, to the point where he could not even go outside for recess without two adults watching him. We felt in crisis, and at a loss for more ideas. Staff were drained, getting confused and frustrated.

A year later, there he was, walking independently with an assistant in the far background (smiling) and Clinton initiating conversation with me. We had turned our "own" corner as a school for this young boy with autism, one of 12 in my school.

So what made the difference?

There were a thousand things, of course, that assisted Clinton in being where he is now. However, one thing I know for sure is that the key ingredients to his inclusion with his peers, and now his academic success, are the collaborative teams and our school's embedded problem-solving structures and processes.

Problem solving collaboration is the yeast to our school bread. We couldn't rise and feel productive, if we didn't have this critical chemistry of skill sets working together in different ways and at different times, with unique synergy.

In my thirty-one years of being an educator in the Northwest Territories, the power of collaborative teams has been the underpinning to our targeted response to student diversity. Our geographic remoteness has propelled us to create our own sustainable team structures, collegial planning, decision-making and problem-solving processes to the point where they are woven into the fabric of staff timetables and school culture.



This has not been an easy journey and at times it has been overwhelming. But we have managed to persist in supporting our students and staff.

After all, between the frigid temperatures and darkness for weeks at a time, we sometimes live indoors 8 hours at a time. We prioritize time for joint planning and devote specific time and funds for that purpose. Teachers are provided with the opportunity to talk about issues that concern them and come up with a plan for each student that is based on our values and is realistic, respectful, and focused on outcomes.

Our unspoken motto for our Student Services Team is “Whatever it takes!” - and - for our teachers it is: “Persist, Persist, Persist.”

As principal of a diverse, multi-cultural school, I also know if I do not make inclusive educational programming a priority for my students, no one else can. It falls to me, as the school’s instructional leader, to set the course for families, and staff.

In Weledeh School we now have eight diverse and embedded staff team structures and five distinct processes for supporting educational programming. I want to share two of the processes with you.

First: Class Mapping with Administration and Programming

This is our newest process to tackle those hard, seemingly unmanageable classrooms situations and/or students whose needs are complex. As principal, I invite classroom teachers and my program support teachers to meet in my office in order to “deconstruct” complex classes. I facilitate a “mapping” exercise as the teacher outlines the profile, strengths, needs and challenges of the class.



Together and from the perspective of our different roles, we create a visual landscape of the class. We identify the different ability groupings and decide on priorities. This may include collaboratively determining what processes to abandon. In the end, it is the classroom teacher who decides the proposed strategies for the class and individual learners.

Teachers have appreciated this supportive process. We do follow up sessions each term as needed. I have found my relationship with individual teachers has become richer through this process and it also solidifies our shared goals.

The second of our five processes includes our program support teachers, leadership reliance teachers, and counsellor coming together.

Second: Student Services Storming is a team process for our support teachers, counsellor, community

liaison and leadership resiliency teacher. We regularly meet in a tiny room off the staff room to share and review our individual worlds with each other for 80 minutes. Each of us writes the name of the students we are supporting teachers with on the whiteboard. These are students who have been identified as “at-risk” for one reason or another.

Our discussion is informed by the interactions we have had with the student and teacher in the preceding week. Sometimes we can’t talk about everyone on the list but the approach keeps us focused and we have learned over time how to pace ourselves. The process has helped give us clarity on goal setting. It has also helped us be creative in our responses. As a result we see ourselves as a seamless tag team able to generate supportive collaboration on complex cases. We have tried many different team formats and approaches, but this one seems to work best for us.

Liz Baile is the Principal of Weledah Catholic School, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. She has been a teacher, program support teacher, district inclusion coordinator and assistant principal in Yellowknife Catholic Schools for more than 30 years. She represented the Yellowknife Association for Community Living on the CACL board for several years.



Did you know?

The Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education - Connections have been established, creating a strong group of renowned researchers in inclusive education at universities all across Canada. Although many Canadian scholars are involved in research that is directly related to inclusion, there has not been a national voice for research in this area until now. Dr. Jacqueline Specht at Western University in London, ON is the Centre Director. By researching and sharing findings with educators, relevant organizations and agencies across Canada and around the world, collectively these scholars aim to empower teachers and others with the knowledge they need to be effective with all students, including those with exceptional needs.

Secondary School: Inclusive Education's Final Frontier

By Amy Kipfer, Ontario

Four years ago I was working as a Special Education Consultant when our team was approached by our Superintendent to start taking a look at inclusive education for all students in our school board. At the time we were busy labelling and sorting students into self-contained classes as we believed this is what would be best for our students.

Once we started to dig into inclusive education research we started to make connections with teachers in school boards who were already working in this area. As a result, our team recognized how much of our work was focused on what was not supported by research. We committed to making significant changes.

We adopted a vision focused on changing our K-12 school system to be fully inclusive. We decided we needed to stop admitting students to self-contained classes and instead include all students in regular classrooms. As we started to share our vision we were repeatedly met with questions from colleagues. They asked, "When you say all, you do not really mean all, do you?" - and with even more disbelief, "You do not mean secondary schools do you?"

We answered, "yes we do" to both questions.

Our board made a significant commitment to support this new approach. They hired a team of 15 teachers to act as Learning for All Coaches. My job was to coordinate this team. We were mandated to adopt a coaching model that would have us support teachers in classrooms in all our schools. We paired ourselves



with teachers who had students in their classrooms who would have previously met the criteria for admission to a self-contained class.

We soon recognized that many teachers were willing to include students but had questions about how this could be successfully done. This was especially evident at the secondary school level.

Secondary schools are laden with structures and procedures that stream students based on achievement and perceived ability. Students with

intellectual capabilities were kept out of the classrooms with great teachers who were passionate about their subject matter and could provide excellent learning opportunities for students that they could not experience anywhere else.

As a Learning for All Coach I started working in secondary schools. My experience as an elementary teacher earlier in my career had not prepared me for the number of self-contained classes I encountered. I had experienced inclusion within my own classroom and in colleagues classes, rooms K-8, and had seen the benefits for students.



Traditional practice in secondary schools resulted in fixed mindsets about students. They carried with them misunderstood labels that resulted in low expectations by their teachers. Since students with developmental disabilities and other learning needs often spent seven years at a secondary school (longer than most students), it was evident that they deserved to experience the full range of experiences and learning opportunities offered to all high school students.

We could not accept that children who had been included when they were young would lose that opportunity just because they got older. Public education has a responsibility to provide the same opportunities throughout their school experience.

We have been on this journey to transform our secondary schools for four years now. We have been working to change the programs, the structures and support systems for both students and teachers. I can say that the experience has been rewarding for the students who have been included, the peers of these students, their teachers, administrators and families.

Students who were previously segregated in our secondary schools now can get credits for the work they accomplish in regular classes. Peers have become friends. They support each other in their classes, on school teams and during social events. When given the opportunity to participate in regular classes, parents and students have been overwhelmingly positive about their experience. As a consequence, the number of self-contained classes has decreased rapidly.

Our teachers and administrators are increasingly using the “inclusion lens” to plan instruction and programming as well as assessment and evaluation. The same approach is used to plan school events, field trips of inclusion and other activities. Our teaching staff have a renewed understanding of why it is important for all students to access regular classrooms. They are experiencing first hand the benefits

student's get when they participate in a fully inclusive secondary school.

While secondary school may well be the final frontier for inclusive education, I can tell you success is attainable. Our school board's decision to move our K-12 system all at once has been a challenge. However the success we have had confirms for me that this has been beneficial for all, students and teachers alike. The experience I have had as a "Learning for All Coordinator" has been the most rewarding and important work I have had. It has been a privilege to be part of this effort.



Amy Kipfer is a Learning for All Coordinator with the Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario. She has conducted training sessions and workshops for teachers in her district as well as other parts of Ontario. She has been a guest speaker at inclusive education sessions sponsored by Inclusive Education Canada and Community Living Ontario.

Did you know?

Coaching to Inclusion is a group of educators from several school districts in South-Western Ontario, preschool educators and other community members who collaborate to offer quality professional development opportunities for inclusive educators.

The conference began as the brainchild of a few people who thought that teachers should have the opportunity to learn from the best minds and leading thinkers about inclusive education. At that time, most people only talked about "integration" of students with disabilities into regular classrooms. We have traveled a long way to today when inclusion is common in our language, and reflects what we now know about how all students should learn.

A Pause from Teaching to Support the Porter & AuCoin Report on Inclusive Education in New Brunswick Schools

By Sophie Pitre-Boudreau, New Brunswick

Years ago during my studies, if someone had have told this little country girl that travelling throughout the province to promote inclusion would become my reality, I might have thought they were reaching a bit far. I grew up in a francophone community far north of the provincial capital and am known for speaking my mind when it comes to controversial topics. Such candor may be perceived as abrasive to some but it is sometimes effective and in this instance, it led to an incredible opportunity to do just that.



When I accepted the position three years ago, a friend and colleague had asked if I thought that I could really make a difference in a system so vast. Today I am still not entirely sure but of two accomplishments in which I take great pride: the triads and the online training for inclusion.

The “triads” were opportunities for schools to work in groups, three to four times per year, to exchange, debate and share effective practices. For two consecutive years, members were able to visit other schools with similar demographics in a cooperative venture free of scrutiny, judgement or pressure. They were able to take pride in their achievements while sharing and exploring other suggestions and approaches in an effort to continually advance initiatives in their own schools. This collaborative approach was the most highly praised of all of the provincial initiatives.



The second accomplishment, in which I take great pride, is the inclusive pedagogical training. This realization was the result of contributions from hundreds of people over twelve months in a concerted effort to offer the training online. Naysayers doubted that we would be able to have a province-wide program up and running within twelve months, but I have never been one to back down from a challenge.

It may not be perfect, but it accurately responds to the present needs of the system, is accessible to everyone and is free of charge. What did I learn from my experience? To have an inclusive school, you need quality personnel who are committed, who care for their students, who are devoted to the notion of including every single person. These schools do exist. They are the ones where personnel strive to continually learn and develop in order to respond to the needs of all of their students. The people who have the power to effect real change are the ones who are there, in the school, close to the students.



Many studies have been conducted and experts have identified the weaknesses in the system and offered solutions. Education remains an investment but it is time to choose to invest in the right places which is in the support and training of school personnel. The best structures won't bring about results unless the people in the schools are engaged and believe in the process.

A friend once blogged, "If you think Education is expensive, try ignorance!" At the end of the day all decisions made, in terms of investments in education, always affect the student. The one whom the system is for is also the person with the least amount of say. The student must deal with the choices that other people have made for him, for the system. Their future depends on the choices that others make for them today. During these difficult economic times choices must be made. The choice needs to be to invest in people.

What have I come to realize following my two and a half years with the provincial government? I believe that as a teacher, I am the person capable of making the biggest difference in my classroom and to my students. I first entered teaching to obtain a career but I remain a teacher today because I care for my students: all two hundred and eight at my school.



Sophie Pitre-Boudreau is a New Brunswick Educator. She has been a teacher, school administrator and served as a key facilitator of the recent efforts to strengthen inclusive education in New Brunswick. Sophie has collaborated on several research studies. She was the team leader in creating an on-line training module on inclusive education for the Francophone sector in New Brunswick.

The Knowing-Doing Gap

By Bendina Miller, British Columbia

When I began my career as a teacher in 1969 the conversation about including students with disabilities in regular classrooms was just beginning. We were-- considering integration which often meant that students were included in specialized classrooms in a neighborhood school. Social integration, whereby students had recess together or attended assemblies together, was often the only times that students with disabilities were actually included together. At that point in time, this would have been considered to be good educational practice because the students were, at least, attending the same school.



As researchers and practitioners gained increased knowledge of how children learn and how educators can best support learning for all students we gained both the academic and practical knowledge that all students have increased learning outcomes in an inclusive environment. I had the professional and personal pleasure of teaching students who, with the provision of appropriate supports and interventions, were successful in an inclusive setting.

We continued to learn so much more about how our students learned and we learned about instructional strategies that were effective in supporting student success. We saw and continue to see the powerful outcomes of strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Differentiated Instruction and grading for success. We witness the extraordinary outcomes of professionals, parents and students working together as a team to plan for success and realize success.



I've had the personal experience, as a Superintendent of Schools, of witnessing teachers, administrators, support professionals, parents and students, and School District Trustees, working with highly skilled professionals in cycles of staff development and learning rounds resulting in significant improvement of learning for all students. I have observed students with disabilities being academically, emotionally and socially engaged with their peers who

have not been identified as having a disability.

The bottom-line is that I have seen individual teachers and support staff working together to build teams that have the capacity to truly make a difference in learning for their students. We have provinces and school districts/divisions that have developed policies designed to engage inclusive education as an expectation, not an option. Ten provinces, 3 territories and the Government of Canada came together resulting in the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on March 11, 2010. Article 24 of that Convention clearly identifies the expectation that all students will learn in an inclusive setting with appropriate supports, which include the professional preparation and on-going staff development that will enable students with disabilities to be successful.

My comments are certainly not news. As educators we are definitely well-aware of the history and knowledge about student learning that I have briefly outlined. Retired from 44 years in public education, I have to admit that I'm deeply saddened that ALL students are not benefitting from the best education possible. Absolutely, there are classrooms and schools right across this country where exemplary practice is evident. There are numerous examples where there is the culture of optimism and the moral courage to make a learning difference for all their students. There are examples where school districts/divisions commit the resources to build the capacity resulting in student academic, emotional and social success. There are examples where leaders ensure that students are included, are attending school in a long-term full-time program, where educators and support staff are working as a team to meet the learning needs of students within their regular class. So, what do we need to do in our communities, provinces/territories and in our country to address the fact that students are still excluded because of a disability? In fact, this exclusion is truly discrimination. What can we do to address the right that all students have to be engaged in the most appropriate, the most successful learning environment with the instructional strategies that we have observed to be successful --- to have their needs met in an inclusive environment? What can we do to eliminate the 'knowing-doing' gap?



Bendina Miller is a Past-President of the Canadian Association for Community Living. She is chair of the Advisory Committee for Inclusive Education Canada. Having worked as a teacher, board coordinator and superintendent of schools, she has worked to support inclusive education throughout her career. Since retirement she has worked on special projects with the Ministry of Education in B.C. Bendina lives in Fairmont Hot Springs British Columbia.

Life Lessons Learned: A Friendship for Life

By Joan Zaretsky, Manitoba

Just two years ago, my life took a new direction as I was given an opportunity with Winnipeg Citizen Advocacy to become a mentor and advocate for a young woman looking for company. I had no idea how this relationship would so deeply influence my beliefs on what life is all about!

I was introduced to Michelle, who it turned out was one month younger than me, in January 2014 and our adventures began. Michelle has cerebral palsy and takes epileptic seizures. She had ventured out on her own about three years earlier, experienced a major seizure resulting in a hospital stay and was told she should not leave her apartment unattended in the future. She was looking for someone to take her out and support her being able to do things in the outside world. That was how I came into the picture. I now view our time spent together as the best day of my week! We do normal things like eating out, grocery shopping and visiting her Mom and we do special things like driving through the country to small towns for hot dogs, ice cream and shopping. She had never been to Burger King and was excited about having this opportunity. She was pleased to be able to shop for her Mother's birthday present.

Being the same age, we enjoy discussing music, fashions, male relationships and other commonalities from our era. We both have a sense of humour and have developed a sisterly sense of teasing each other. I always tell her she should listen to me and respect her elders and she comments on how I am so old! I believe it is my role to make her life fun and make her laugh and these fun times together boomerang adding fun and laughter to my life at the same time. I have learned so many life lessons from Michelle through our relationship. While I can talk about my beliefs and convictions regarding inclusive education, Michelle talks about her lived experiences. There are three lessons I value the most.

First, Michelle has taught me humility. While we take so many things for granted, she struggles with daily life activities such as zippering up her purse, tying her shoes and others. She accepts her challenges as her normal daily life and continues to always be positive. She embraces life with grace and makes the most of each day.

Secondly, Michelle has really grounded me in what life is all about. I was in tears as she told me she had never had a real friend before, someone she can ask silly questions, laugh and cry with and share her life experiences. She has had paid companions but relayed that is not the same. I just keep telling her she is stuck with me for life and we laugh together. I have come to realize the value of having friends in our lives. Without them, we are an island alone.

Lastly, I have learned to "Celebrate your own beauty", the words on a picture I gave her for Christmas last year. Each of us has gifts and talents and a valued role to play in this world. Michelle has so many gifts to share and I have been very privileged she shares her gifts with me. She always has a positive attitude and loves to tease people. She likes to live on the edge and loves nothing more than to drive with the window

completely down and the wind blowing through her hair. She has a fierce sense of determination to improve her walking, walking up and down her apartment hallway daily with a special form on her leg. She works hard to talk so others can understand her.

We recently presented to a class at Red River Community College and unlike the previous year when her only comment was “I talk funny and people don’t understand me”, this year she talked, laughed and answered the questions of the students. She even asked for the last word with a final thought she wanted to add. I was so proud of her confidence level as she shared her perspective of our relationship. She wants to be as independent as possible and I generally wait for her to ask for help before offering it. Sometimes it is hard for me to watch her struggle as she perseveres to complete the task.

I want to thank Winnipeg Citizen Advocacy for supporting us in our relationship and promoting the matching of mentors with adults with disabilities. Without their intervention, this relationship would never have developed. Michelle has made a difference in my life which could not be imagined without her presence. In November, she gave me a birthday card that read “Imagine a cake with a candle for every time you listened or put someone else before yourself. Imagine a candle for every moment you made a difference in someone else’s life. The light from all those candles would make the world so much warmer, brighter and happier ... just like you.” I told Michelle it was the light from her many candles that made my life brighter. She truly is a friend for life and a soul sister!

Dr. Joan Zaretsky has been an educator for the past 40 years, serving as a classroom teacher, principal, Language Arts Consultant, Curriculum Coordinator, a Professional Issues Staff Officer with the Manitoba Teachers’ Society and a sessional instructor at University of Manitoba and Winnipeg. Joan completed her Doctorate in Inclusive Special Education in 2011. She won the Thomas B. Greenfield Award presented by the Canadian Association for the Study of Education Administration (CASEA) for her dissertation, entitled “Perspectives of Northern Manitoba Principals Regarding New Special Education Legislation”. Joan has delivered workshops at conferences sponsored by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the International Council for Exceptional Children, the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration, the Canadian Association of Community Living, and the Manitoba Teachers’ Society in the area of inclusive education. While she officially retired in 2011, she refers to herself as “reinvented” as she continues to consult with, and support, many educational organizations. She has continued her own lifelong learning in the area of Universal Design in Learning, becoming a trained facilitator in the Three Block Model developed by Dr. Jennifer Katz. In 2014-15, she was the first Chair of the newly formed Manitoba Alliance for Universal Design for Learning (MAUDeL) Board of Directors, an organization designed to support social and academic inclusion for all students through the use of universal design for learning strategies.



Social Inclusion is Not Enough!

By Missy Pfaff, Ontario

Have you or your children ever been asked to a swimming or skating party? What about joining a pottery or yoga class with a friend? How about attending a learning workshop on technology? All of these examples are wonderful opportunities to actively participate with others.

But what if you couldn't swim or had no skates? What if there were no extra art materials or yoga mats available? What if your tablet was not charged? How would the experience be different?

Well, you could go to the pool or arena and stand on the sidelines smiling and waving as your friends did cannonballs into the pool or played crack the whip on the ice. You could probably sit at the table for the pottery class and make small talk while your friends experienced the feel of the clay and the turning of the potter's wheel. It might be just fine to simply listen to the instructions on how to use the new app while others are trying it out and talking about how to make it work. You might still be socially included. But it wouldn't be the same, would it?



In order to be truly included in whatever setting you find yourself in, you must also have an opportunity to participate in that activity. What would you talk about or laugh about or be frustrated with or use your senses to experience if you are not a participant in what is happening? It is not the same experience to simply be socially included in that setting. And really what does that mean, "socially included".

There seems to be a distinction between social inclusion and academic inclusion. For some students, goals are set around social inclusion, but not for academic inclusion. Many teachers and parents believe that the academics are so far beyond the scope of that student's understanding that they are included for social reasons only. When that happens, are we meeting the needs of all of our students simply by having them in the class for social reasons?

We must be careful as teachers and school leaders not to limit student participation in the activity of the classroom based on social inclusion goals. Not all students will participate in the same way, but they do need to participate.

Students could be participating in the same activity, but meeting different goals. Some students may be working on their oral presentation skills, while others are practicing their use of an electronic switch. Same activity -- different goals.

If the focus of our classrooms is academics, then we need students to be academically and socially included. When the interests of all the learners in a classroom are considered, the level of participation increases for everyone.

And so does the engagement and the learning!



Missy Pfaff is a “Learning for All Coordinator” with the Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario. With over 25 years of experience, she is excited to see that new learning happens in classrooms and staffrooms where a growth mindset and a belief that all children can learn is present!

Did you know?

Inclusive Education Canada is a Canadian NGO that focuses on sharing information, news, opinions and insights on inclusive education and accommodation of diversity. We believe that inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school.

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