

# Let's Chat... about Inclusive Education

*Hosts Gordon L. Porter, Jacqueline Specht and Diane Richler*



**Guest:  
Sheila Bennett**

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Dr. Sheila Bennett is a Professor of Education and a member of the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education. She is also an active member

of the Inclusive Education Canada Network of Associates. Professor Bennett began her teaching career in her native Newfoundland and Labrador after graduating from Memorial University in St. John's. Prior to and upon completion of her graduate work at the University of Toronto, Dr. Bennett held several classroom and school board positions prior to joining the Faculty of Education at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Her areas of research and practice include: special education policy, disabilities, local and international teacher education, parent participation in education and most importantly inclusion for students with diverse needs. Lead author of Special Education in Ontario Schools, Dr. Bennett continues to publish and lecture on rights based inclusive practices in education.

Interests: Rights based education, Parent engagement, Transition from school to workplace, teacher education, Transition from school to workplace, teacher education

# Key Issues in this Chat Session:

1. **Lifelong Value of Inclusion:** In Newfoundland and Labrador, Sheila attended an inclusive school growing up and then worked as a teacher in an inclusive board. When continuing her education career in Ontario, Sheila worked in a self-contained behaviour classroom. This segregated learning, starkly different than her previous experiences, reaffirmed her value of inclusion and informed her professional goals and attention.
2. **The Tipping Point:** While recently teaching a class of students nearing the end of their teaching degrees, Sheila was very impressed by the students' attitudes towards inclusion as a human right. Their passion inspired her, and she suggests that with more new teachers entering the workforce with these opinions, we could reach a tipping point in the movement towards inclusion.
3. **Social Capital:** Sheila stressed the importance of social capital for everyone and shares an example from her family. The critical need for students who experience "barriers to learning" to acquire social capital is discussed. Sheila observed that teachers have incredible power and influence in either growing or reducing a student's social capital and it's important to have specific strategies for building social capital within the classroom.
4. **Cognitive Dissonance Experienced by Teachers:** Cognitive dissonance occurs for many teachers who complete their training with a mind-set or intention to be inclusive. Since many schools and boards in Ontario continue to operate classes that are not inclusive, in the early stages of their careers, these teachers struggle to maintain their inclusive intentions that clash with their day-to-day experience in their school.
5. **Legislation and Policy are Key:** Sheila asserts that a key factor in implementing inclusive education across Ontario is to have it clearly stated in the policy and legislation. She suggests that because the current legislation is vague, it's open to interpretation and therefore school boards can implement different models for educating students with barriers to learning. The consequence is a continuation of segregated classes and programs.
6. **Inclusive Mindset:** Sheila believes that the most important factor in creating successful inclusive schools is mindset. A fundamental belief that all students belong goes a long way.
7. **Intolerance towards Difference:** Sheila explained that segregated classrooms are a disservice to all students, not just those who are excluded. Inclusive classrooms provide students with the opportunity to meet others with diverse abilities, knowledge, skills and backgrounds. By engaging with individuals different than themselves they gain an understanding that it is possible for all people to belong in our society. In the absence of this experience, students may well develop an intolerance to difference.

## Potential Discussion Questions (before viewing):

1. What is your current understanding of social capital and why is it important?
2. In what ways do school, and experiences within schools, model 'adulthood' and society at large?

# Potential Discussion Questions (after viewing):

1. After starting her career in Newfoundland, Dr. Bennet said she was “shocked” and “astounded” by the degree of segregation she found in schools she moved to in Ontario. What practices contributed to this reaction?
2. Has your understanding of social capital and its importance changed after viewing this chat session? In what ways is the development of social capital particularly important for students with barriers to learning?
3. Dr. Bennett suggests that we hold segregated education to the same scrutiny as inclusion often is. How can we do this? What are the potential benefits to questioning the status quo?
4. Do you think it is feasible to motivate school leaders to question segregated education systems the way inclusive systems are questioned?

## More from Shelia Bennett:

Bennett, S., Gallagher, T., Somma, M., White, R. (2021) Transitioning Towards Inclusion: A Triangulated View of the Role of Educational Assistants. *Journal of Research in Special Education Needs* Vol..., 1-11 doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12508

Bennett, S., Gallagher T., Somma, M., White, R. & Woldczyk, K. (2021). Transitioning from segregation to inclusion: An effective and sustainable model to promote inclusion through internal staffing adjustments and role redefinition. In T. Loreman, J. Goldan, & J. Lambrecht. *International perspectives on inclusive education. Volume 15: Resourcing inclusive education – perspectives on funding and professional development.* Emerald Publishing. ISBN 9781800434578.

Bennett, S. (2020) Rethinking the Familiar: It Is Not About Changing Our Actions, It Is About Changing Our Thinking. *Exceptionality Education International*, 30, 19-31. Retrieved from <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/eei/vol30/iss2/4>

Bennett, S., Specht, J., Somma, M. et al. Navigating School Interactions: Parents of Students with Intellectual Disabilities Speak Out. *Current Dev Disorders Rep* 7, 149–154 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40474-020-00203-z>

Bennett, S., Sabin, M., & Chadwick, C. (2019). Jake Case Study. In Calder-Stegemann K. & Aucoin A. (Eds.) *Inclusive Education: Stories of Success and Hope in a Canadian Context.* Toronto: Pearson. ISBN 978-13-418413-5.

Gallagher, T.L. and Bennett, S.M. (2018), "The six "P" model: principles of coaching for inclusion coaches", *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-03-2017-0018>

Reid, L., Bennett, S., Specht, S. White, R., Somma, M., Li, X., Lattanzio, R., Gavan, K., Kyle, G., Porter, G. & Patel, A. If inclusion means everyone, why not me? (2018). ARCH Disability Law Centre, Community Living Ontario.

