



Let's Chat About Inclusive Education: A Trans-Atlantic Commentary on Series III

By **David Towell**, Director of the *Centre for Inclusive Futures*,
London UK



Let me begin by congratulating the three hosts of this important series of broadcasts and especially Gordon Porter who has organised and produced the whole series. Thirty broadcasts represents a lot of effort and the whole series continues to demonstrate the wealth of experience and expertise available across Canada to energise transformational change in education.

After the first 20 Chats, those in the third series were bound to involve some repetition of themes from earlier broadcasts - as indeed does my Commentary - but even where there is repetition, I found Series III contributors adding new angles and examples.

Overall, I think the cumulative story from these broadcasts paints a mixed picture of progress in Canada. On the positive side, the 40 years of experience to date has clearly given great depth to our understanding of inclusive practice and enriched the variety of instructional strategies and tools available to teachers and others - as, for example, *Donna McGhee-Richmond* describes. Moreover, the respondents who teach teachers mostly give a positive account of the willingness of those now entering the profession to think holistically and become (as *Vianne Timmons* puts this) detectives seeking to identify each child's unique gifts and possibilities. As a consequence, we have many more examples of students with disabilities belonging in regular schools and achieving success.

On the other hand, it sometimes seems - as *Donna Barrett* describes - that such individual success is not generalised to the school as a whole; parents still have to fight hard to gain and maintain school inclusion for their children especially in places where there is major investment in segregated 'special schools'; and some of the impetus to advance inclusion has been lost or at least become more diffuse as we have got further away from where this social movement started.

In the latter context, we should also note that while attention to diversity in its many forms and appreciation of intersectionality (the association between different types of disadvantage) broaden our understanding of inclusion/exclusion, it is important that disability is not lost from this complexity.

In my third Commentary therefore, I have sought to identify a small number of propositions that might inform our efforts to do better. Of course, I offer this list as no more than a trans-Atlantic stimulus for the conclusions that Canadian readers draw for themselves.

1. Maintain the utmost clarity about what inclusive education means

Marilyn Dolmage is a parent and has been industriously working to help other parents, students and schools for several decades. As she puts this, '*inclusion is a richly woven blanket and we must attend to all the threads*'. It is well worth listening to what she says again: inclusive education is about welcoming all students with disabilities into neighbourhood schools alongside their brothers and sisters; it is about holding high expectations for their participation and contribution; it is about giving good support to both teachers and students so that everyone can learn; and it is about recognising that education with one's peers has important social as well as academic benefits - a point also emphasised by *Zana Lutfiyya*.

2. Stay in touch with the roots of our movement

Time moves on, new people enter this field, we can lose touch with what drove efforts to achieve educational reform. Using the important example of the 1980s legal fight (based on the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*) by Luke Ellwood's family in Nova Scotia, *Lynn Aylward* makes a powerful argument - presented more fully in the film she has co-produced - about the need to remember the realities of segregation and the huge efforts ordinary families made to change this. We stand on the shoulders of these pioneers.

3. Make education the key element in ensuring people are included throughout the life-span.

In Series II, *Genia Stephen* talks eloquently about seeking to ensure her son was at the heart of community from his birth. In the latest Series, *Kathryn Underwood*

reinforces this message in relation to the early years and pre-school education, where there is still a lot to be done. Equally, *Ken Pike*, who has a wide role as social policy lead at *Inclusion NB*, makes the point that the experience of inclusive schooling lays the foundations for successful inclusion in adult life, for example in employment and housing.

4. Strengthen family advocacy, individually and collectively

It may be disappointing to say this, but as already noted, in many parts of Canada school inclusion still depends heavily on the efforts of parents to make this the preferred option for their children with disabilities. Moreover, partnership between families and teachers is very important in ensuring that each student enjoys a positive educational experience. *Ken Pike* uses the work of *Inclusion NB* to illustrate how the multi-level work of family associations - informing and supporting individual families, helping teachers and schools, advocating for systemic change at the policy level - are together essential to making sustained progress.

5. Value and support teachers in their journey to inclusive practice

It is well understood in these broadcasts that continuing education and support for classroom teachers is the key investment required to advance inclusive education. *Monique Somma*, a teacher educator, argues persuasively that (like students) teachers need to be life-long learners, always seeing each new student as unique and seeking to understand how they learn best, within a school culture that prioritises reflective practice.

6. Promote effective school and system leadership

Extending this last point, school principals and their deputies are critical in defining the purpose and culture of schools: they make the difference in places where policy is ambiguous as to whether inclusive education advances or otherwise. Undoubtedly positive leadership at this level is influenced by personal biographies, especially previous successful experience of inclusive practice, but - as *Steve Sider* suggested in Series II - developing genuinely inspiring school and system-level leadership, mostly using experiential methods, needs to be another key investment in achieving system-wide change.

7. Build inclusive policies through inclusive processes

As *Cathy Montreuil* argues most fully from her influential provincial role, this means embedding inclusion in the centre of law and policy-making so it is not vulnerable to changing political winds and priorities. It also means establishing processes that ensure policy-making is itself an inclusive process, for example by ensuring we hear the voices of the people most affected by our decisions and by disaggregating available data so as to tease out differential impacts on different sub-groups. Even in small provinces, there can be a long distance from the classroom to the Minister's office: we have to ensure that the educational enterprise becomes a learning system, mobilising multiple feedback loops so that we 'see' the whole system at work.

Concluding Thoughts

Finally, these broadcasts and other work of *Inclusive Education Canada* exemplify another critical proposition: there has certainly been '*top down*' change in Canada, driven by progressive law and policy; there has also been '*bottom up*' change stimulated through the efforts of local innovators. But perhaps more important than either in achieving wide progress towards inclusive education has been what in my Series I Commentary I call '*scaling across*': sharing ideas and experiences through lateral networks - especially those that cross boundaries through including students, families, teachers, other educational leaders and researchers - and building advocacy coalitions that enhance the momentum for reform. The "*Let's Chat*" series produced by *Inclusive Education Canada* offers an impressive set of resources for renewing these efforts in 2023 and beyond.