

The Evolution Toward Inclusive Education in Canada

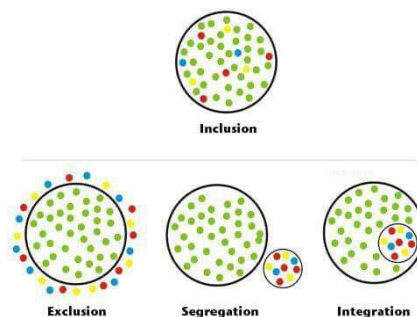
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Worldwide, children with disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2018). In Canada, ongoing advocacy efforts have resulted in an evolution of special education over time. Eras of: (1) Exclusion, (2) Segregation, (3) Integration, and (4) Inclusion have emerged. In our not so distant past, children with disabilities were completely excluded from public education. The era of exclusion marked a dehumanization of people with disabilities (e.g., genocidal efforts, abuse, neglect, etc.). Within the last half century in Canada, we moved toward an era of segregation. In 1980 students with exceptionalities in Ontario were granted the right to access public education under Bill 82 (Education Amendment Act, 1980, c, 61). Rather than being cast away in horrid institutions, children were hidden away in separate classrooms from that of their same-aged peers. In more recent years, the era of integration has emerged, as more students with exceptionalities are being educated in mainstream classes than ever before. While full integration of students with disabilities has not yet been established, it has become clear that inclusion requires more than the location of service delivery. While this service-delivery model is clearly a prerequisite for inclusion, integration in and of itself appears to be insufficient because exclusive practices can persist within the classroom.

The apparent next phase of our evolution has emerged as a philosophy but has not been actualized on a large scale as of yet. There has been a slow, but steadfast effort toward an inclusive model of education in Canada (and beyond). Before inclusion can be achieved, we need to rid our system of the remnants of exclusion and segregation, which are all still very much a part of our education system. In Canada, separate schools and classrooms for students with exceptionalities still exist. Students with intellectual disabilities in particular continue to be excluded at alarming rates (Reid et al., 2018). Public systems of education were not created with disability in mind, in fact quite the opposite was the case. Many modern-day education systems were originally created to maximize the economic potential of its future citizens and thus to exclude those deemed 'uneducable'. This historical context begs the question: *can this system evolve into an inclusive one, given that it was conceived with such a blatant disregard for exceptional learners?*



If you are an educator chances are you have heard of the term inclusion and may have even worked in an inclusive classroom or for a school board that espouses an inclusive philosophy. Great efforts have been made with regard to inclusivity initiatives and the evidence clearly showcases the benefits of inclusion for all stakeholders. Inclusion is about every student feeling a sense of belonging in their classroom and school (Reid et al., 2018). This feeling is dependent upon a multitude of factors, but clearly one's peers hold a great deal of power in the social arena. Unfortunately, the way in which children are conditioned to think about disability threatens the very notion of inclusive education. Representations of disability are often absent (Favazza et al., 2017) or perpetuate stereotypes (e.g., pity, inspiration, etc.). Inclusion may not be possible until we rehumanize disability. Children are learning at young ages that disability is a tragedy (among other negative stereotypes) rather than a diverse and valuable representation of the human experience. If left unexamined, deficit-based understandings of disability can lead to preconceived notions and poor attitudes toward disability, which can in turn play a major factor in the social inclusion or exclusion of students with exceptionalities (Freer, 2021).

As educators, we have a responsibility to teach children about diverse disability experiences and help students to critically analyze antiquated representations/understandings of disability that are pervading in our society. In doing so, we can begin to challenge ableism in our schools, which will be a necessary step forward if an era of inclusion is to make its ascendance. As educators, we also need to seek out opportunities to critically appraise our own understandings of disability and seek guidance from those with this lived experience. Disability Studies in Education can provide a framework for inclusive education and help all learners (including educators) to appreciate diverse abilities in the classroom and beyond. Systemwide changes may be required for inclusion to thrive in the long term but challenging the roots of ableism within the system seems like a prudent place to begin.

References

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