



Closing special schools: lessons from Canada

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Received: 17 December 2022 / Accepted: 11 September 2023
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Abstract

Many countries grapple with the tension between commitment to inclusive education reform and the closure of special schools. This tension is particularly problematic for countries, like Australia, that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The CRPD is clear that closing special schools is pivotal to protecting the rights of students with disability to an inclusive education. Some provinces in Canada are considered to be leaders in the movement away from segregated education for students with disability. This paper reports on a critical review of the Canadian literature to develop a conceptual framework of drivers for, and barriers to special school closure. Drivers and barriers were identified at four levels: (1) societal level; (2) system level; (3) school level and (4) community level, with implications for each discussed. The findings will inform policy implementation in countries striving to meet their CRPD obligations.

Keywords Inclusive education · Disability · Special schools · Critical review

Introduction

Inclusive education has been described as a key focus for national and international educational reform, aspired to globally but in need of continuing scrutiny because of changing political agendas (Nevill & Savage, 2022). One direction for progressing inclusive education that needs more attention is the mandate of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2008) to end segregated schooling. Specifically, the CRPD General Comment No. 4 states that the realisation of the rights of students with disability ‘is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: mainstream and special/segregated education’ (United Nations, 2016, para. 39). However, dual systems providing

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both mainstream and special education are common throughout the world (Buchner et al., 2021) and many countries espouse and actively support inclusive education while continuing to fund special schools (see e.g. Lassig et al., 2022). Felder (2021) stated ‘that while most national and supranational education policies embrace, incorporate and promote the idea of inclusive education, they maintain a traditional orientation towards the special needs or disabilities of children and young people, even in systems or under labels claiming to be inclusive’ (p. 43). Globally, educators and advocates are questioning the wisdom of, and evidence for, a binary system of mainstream and special schools (e.g. Shevlin & Banks, 2021) including questions regarding the efficiency and equity of resources to support special education (Banks, 2020; Porter, 2008).

For many years, a dual pathway that includes the option of segregated schools has been provided based on the assumption that some children with disability are better placed in special education settings (Hehir et al., 2016). However, evidence demonstrates that segregated (special) education for students with disability is built on a set of assumptions about difference drawing on the medical model of disability (Hansen et al., 2020), and has led to marginalisation, institutionalisation and exclusion (ACIE, 2021; de Bruin, 2020). In contrast, there is evidence that inclusive education leads to positive academic and social emotional outcomes *for all students*, with and without disabilities (Hehir et al., 2016; Szumski et al., 2017).

To date, discussions about progressing educational inclusion have focussed on building capacity in mainstream schools (Brussino, 2021) rather than desegregation. Special schools, however, remain a significant barrier to inclusive education reform (de Bruin et al., 2023; Felder, 2021; Jahnukainen, 2015). In providing an alternative option for students with disability, special schools release mainstream schools from their obligation to include students with disability and encourage gatekeeping practices that restrict access to local schools (ACIE, 2021; Poed et al., 2020). Additionally, the maintenance of special schools leads to funding allocation methods that privilege segregation (de Bruin, 2020). These types of practices prevent the realisation of inclusion and the improvements in pedagogy necessary to teach students with disability in mainstream classrooms (Cologon, 2019).

Capacity building in mainstream schools remains essential; however, history is clear that this is not enough to end segregation; success at an individual school level is insufficient to produce system level change (AuCoin et al., 2020). In light of the CRPD, special schools have become the ‘crux of the inclusion debate’ (Shevlin & Banks, 2021, pp. 4/11) and the issue of special school closure can no longer be avoided. Unified education systems are the ‘gold standard’ of inclusion (Mooney & Lashewicz, 2015, p. 3). For education systems seeking to progress inclusive education, the challenge has become not only how to make mainstream classrooms more inclusive but also how to dismantle existing dual pathways and close segregated schools. With its fragmented educational landscape, Canada is one jurisdiction where much can be learned about the complexity of progress towards special school closure. In some Canadian provinces, special school closure took place many years ago, while in others, change in this respect is happening more slowly. This paper reviews the literature to explore the levers that have driven the dissolution of special schools in some areas of Canada and those that have hampered the desegregation

process in others, with the aim of identifying implications for transforming binary education systems into unified ones.

The closure of special schools in Canada

Canada boasts 10 provinces and three territories. The country is recognised for handling diversity (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019) with a tremendous will and capacity for inclusion (MacKay, 2006); however, the rate of desegregation and implementation of inclusive practice have varied (Timmons, 2008). Some studies indicate a discrepancy between the ideological and practical commitment to inclusive education, for example, in Alberta, where there is reportedly increased labelling, diagnosis and growing trends of segregated education due to the impact of neoliberal market forces (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011; Jahnukainen, 2015). It is clear that Alberta is committed to inclusive education at a policy level (since the late 1980s) (Alberta Government, 2023) but continues to have a continuum of special and general education schools that are located separately, creating barriers to progressing desegregation. In Ontario, another Canadian province, government documents indicate intent to move towards inclusive education but in reality, there is still a dual system of general and special education (Killoran et al., 2013).

While many schools in Canada are not yet inclusive (Loreman, 2014a; Sokal & Katz, 2015), it is generally recognised that some Canadian provinces have made more progress than most places in the world, regarding the closure of special schools (Porter & Richler, 2011). New Brunswick in Canada, for example, leads the world regarding the closure of segregated schools (AuCoin et al., 2020) and inclusive education reform (Köpfer & Óskarsdóttir, 2019; Porter & Towell, 2017).

We undertook a *critical review* of the literature (Grant & Booth, 2009) on education for students with disability in Canada to determine the drivers for and barriers to special school closure. Different from systematic reviews, ‘a critical review provides an opportunity to “take stock” and evaluate what is of value from the previous body of work’ (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 93) with the aim of analysing and synthesising information from diverse sources to produce a new conceptual model or framework.

Procedure for the critical review

Our critical review involved a general and historical exploration of diverse sources relevant to desegregation in Canada. The sources included journal articles, book chapters, publicly available government reviews and reports and unpublished doctoral theses that give insights into special school closure. Critical reviews do not utilise systematic literature review methods but examine and distil what is valuable from the existing literature in a particular body of work, and effective critical reviews result in new conceptual development (Grant & Booth, 2009). Our process was driven by the goal of understanding the dynamics of special school closure. We took an evaluative stance on the existing body of work on inclusive education in Canada to determine what is of value regarding the process of desegregation. We

used our findings to develop a new conceptual framework of drivers for, and barriers to, the closing of special schools. The three-step critical review process involved: (1) identification and retrieval of relevant diverse literature; (2) collaborative analysis and (3) synthesis of ideas (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Identification and retrieval of relevant literature

A literature search was conducted via the PsycINFO database, using a combination of the keywords ‘inclusive education OR mainstreaming’, ‘disabilit* OR special needs’ and ‘Canada OR Canadian’, and further limiting results to articles that were printed in English. This search resulted in 259 publications, which were reduced to 29 after screening based on title and abstract. In accordance with the review plan, when screening literature for inclusion, particular focus was given to sources that provided insights into the closure of special schools; identification of political, legal, or social pressures involved and research evaluating the progress of inclusive education. Further hand-searching sourced 25 publications, including government reports that had been referenced in the articles. Six additional relevant publications previously identified by the authors were also included.

The following key information from the literature was extracted and compiled in a spreadsheet: (1) year of publication; (2) Canadian province; (3) publication type; (4) methodological approach/design (as applicable); (5) key focus and (6) summary of findings. On closer reading, one publication was found to be a duplicate and 25 publications were found to have no relevant information regarding the closure of special schools. This left a total of 34 documents, published between 1991 and 2020, included in this critical review (Fig. 1).

Collaborative analysis

Our collaborative analysis (Grant & Booth, 2009) involved a comprehensive investigation of the selected literature for factors implicated in the closure of Canadian special schools. Through this analysis, we identified three initial broad areas of influence: society, school and community. Following repeated readings of relevant literature and discussions among the research team members, this analysis was further refined to six key factors: (1) societal attitudes and beliefs; (2) laws and policies; (3) educational beliefs and attitudes; (4) actions at the bureaucratic level; (5) actions at the school level and (6) community actions (including the actions of parents). The first two key factors were collapsed to represent the societal drivers in our framework, and similarly, factors three and four were collapsed into the systemic drivers of our final framework.

In the course of our analysis, the lack of educational unity across Canada became evident and it was clear that there were also important lessons to be learned about *barriers* to special school closure. Although not the initial focus of our investigation, identifying these factors better reflects the inconsistency in moves towards desegregation in Canada and the complexity of closing special schools more generally. We grouped the factors that worked *against* special school closure using similar themes to our drivers.

Number of included sources before and after eligibility screening

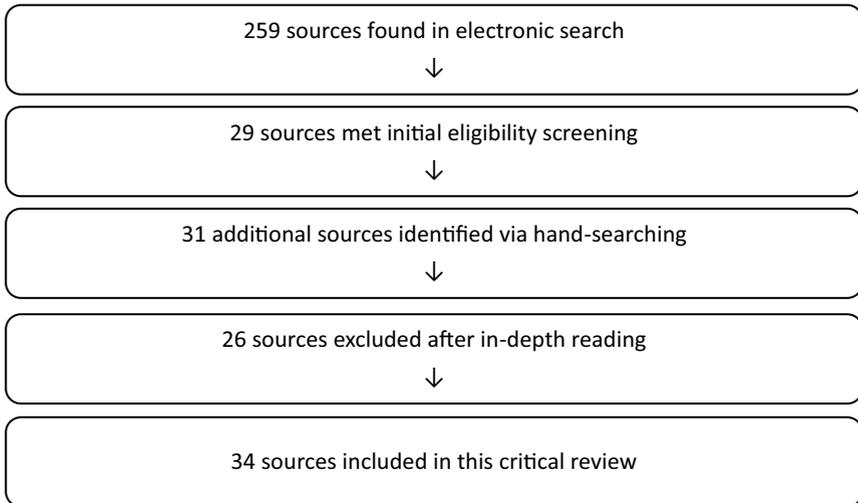


Fig. 1 Number of included sources before and after eligibility screening

This resulted in a final framework of societal, systemic, school and community drivers and barriers.

Synthesis of ideas

The strength of a critical review is the new conceptual thinking that arises from the review (de Klerk & Pretorius, 2019; Grant & Booth, 2009). Our aim was not just descriptive, but the development of a conceptual framework of special school closure to contribute new thinking in inclusive education reform. A framework presents an overview of constructs and ‘the relations between them that are presumed to account for a phenomenon’ (Nilsen, 2015, p. 2). Our framework involved an in-depth process of assembling the drivers for, and barriers to, special school closure into a cohesive overview. We drew on documented experiences in Canada, including the disparate experiences between and within provinces, to understand the dynamics of special school closure and how a unified system of education might be achieved. We propose this framework, not as an end and final output, but as a starting point for further discussion and research (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Findings and discussion

Our findings are organised into four headings that sit under Drivers and Barriers at: (1) societal, (2) systemic, (3) school and (4) community levels. Each level is described, followed by a discussion of the principal factors at that level that were generated from our collaborative critical analysis of the literature. These findings form the basis of our framework for progressing the closure of special schools.

Societal level drivers of special school closure

Drivers at this level include contextual factors; societal attitudes, beliefs, and values and international, national and provincial laws and policies.

Contextual factors

A unified education system has been more possible in Canadian provinces that have contextual features such as rural locations and small communities with no existing segregated services (Irvine et al., 2010). In such provinces, of which New Brunswick is one, segregated schools have been dismantled in a shorter timeframe than elsewhere (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019). Generic services that serve all children (Jahnukainen, 2011; Timmons, 2008) have facilitated the speed of change (MacKay, 2006). These contextual factors have been associated with a quick response to calls for inclusive education and the closure of special schools.

Attitudes, beliefs, values

Changing attitudes towards the segregation of individuals with disability have influenced educational practices. For example, Normalisation—the belief that it is beneficial for people with disability to follow the same rhythms and patterns of life that people without disability experience (Wolfensberger, 1972)—is cited when special school closure in Canada is discussed (Belanger & Gougeon, 2009; Loreman, 2014a; Lupart, 1998; Lupart & Webber, 2012; Porter & Richler, 2011). In some provinces, segregation came to be associated with harm (Porter & Richler, 1991), the ‘removal of humanity and dignity’ (Timmons, 2008, p. 135) and isolation and abuse (Timmons, 2008). This realisation and increasingly positive perceptions of inclusion (Mackenzie & Kwong, 2016) drove redress for historic disadvantage (Szechtman, 2006), public expectation for inclusive education and moral calls for special school closure (Lupart & Webber, 2012).

Two other significant trends associated with departure from special schooling were the Human Rights Movement (AuCoin et al., 2020; Kohen et al., 2010; Lupart, 1998; Lupart & Webber, 2012; MacKay, 2006; Porter, 2008; Somma, 2020; Szechtman, 2006) and the Community Living Movement (Lupart, 1998; Lupart & Webber, 2012; Porter & Richler, 1991). Based on a belief in social justice (Timmons, 2008) and the incongruity between social justice and segregation (Mooney & Lashewicz, 2015), these trends have been associated with positive views and acceptance

of people with disability, and societal pressure to achieve equity in schools (Lupart, 1998). Schools became instruments for equitable democratic societies (Porter, 2008).

Laws and policies

Whether driving or reflecting changes in societal attitudes, international and national laws and policies have had a significant part to play in special school closure. From an international perspective, the Salamanca Statement is one such influence (AuCoin et al., 2020; Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019), as is the CRPD (Porter, 2008; Porter & Richler, 2011). National changes to legislation meant increased government responsibilities for the education of students with disability where there had once been none (Porter & Richler, 2011). With the Charter of Rights and Freedom (1982), Canada's commitment to the rights of people with disability was enshrined in law (AuCoin et al., 2020; Irvine et al., 2010; Kohen et al., 2010; Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019; Loreman, 2014a; Lupart, 1998; Porter, 2008; Porter & Richler, 1991; Pivik et al., 2002; Szechtman, 2006; Timmons, 2008; Van Walleghem et al., 2013). According to Sokal and Katz (2015), Canada was the first country in the world to include the rights of people with disability in a national Charter. Segregation because of disability became a legal issue of human rights and equality, and the right to the same education and protection from discrimination for persons with disability became a key focus (Porter & Richler, 1991; Szechtman, 2006; Timmons, 2008).

Educational decisions in Canada are made at a provincial level, however, and some provinces have been quicker to act on international and national requirements than others. New Brunswick, for example, passed Bill 85 in 1986 to mandate the closure of special schools (AuCoin et al., 2020; Belanger & Gougeon, 2009; Kohen et al., 2010; MacKay, 2006) and then was quick to review legislation based on the CRPD (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Ontario, too, amended legislation to provide for the rights of students with disability in mainstream rather than special settings (MacKay, 2006; Szechtman, 2006). Provincial laws have been 'decisive in initiating desegregation' (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019, p. 882), a key driver for the closure of segregated settings, and a mandate for inclusion (Belanger & Gougeon, 2009; Irvine et al., 2010; Loreman, 2014a; Lupart, 2012; Timmons, 2008; Van Walleghem et al., 2013).

Systemic level drivers of special school closure

Drivers at this level include educational reforms, bureaucratic processes and funding allocations for students with disability.

Education reform

Historically, special schools were established to address an educational gap for Canadian students with disability (Porter, 2008; Siegel & Ladyman, 2000), and

educational exclusion has remained the norm for many Canadian students with disability (Porter & Richler, 2011; Timmons, 2008). In some provinces, however, it was recognised that segregated education was not serving students with disability well (Lupart & Webber, 2012) or producing the hoped-for results (Porter, 2008). Charity-based approaches were failing to empower the students they were meant to assist (Somma, 2020) and a clear shift was made in some parts of Canada to education systems informed by definitions of inclusive education (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). In some provinces, a growing belief in the value of inclusive education for all (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Timmons, 2008) led to a reversal of special education patterns, for example, the categorisation of students according to disability diagnoses (Lupart, 2012). The focus shifted from difference to similarity regarding students with disability and their peers (Irvine et al., 2010).

When diversity became situated in social and cultural practice rather than in students themselves (Irvine et al., 2010), waves of school reforms and heated debates about students with disability (Lupart & Webber, 2012) galvanised movements towards the closure of special schools. Segregated services were increasingly criticised (Lupart & Webber, 2012), and special education enrolments decreased. Inclusion became the 'norm' (Szechtman, 2006) and disability was no longer equated with special schools (AuCoin et al., 2020). In some provinces, a belief in the rights of all students to attend mainstream classrooms became widespread (MacKay, 2006). Furthermore, education was seen as having a role to play in socialisation and development of inclusive attitudes (MacKay, 2006).

Bureaucratic actions

When special schools have closed, bureaucracy has played a role, for example, the cost and inefficiency of maintaining two systems have been questioned (Loreman, 2014a; Lupart & Webber, 2012; Porter, 2008; Porter & Richler, 1991) and the traditional mainstream and special systems were merged (Lupart, 1998; Mooney & Lashewicz, 2015). It was concluded by some that a dual system limited the restructuring required for inclusive education (Lupart & Webber, 2012).

Government statements increasingly articulated the aspirations of inclusive education (MacKay, 2006; Porter et al., 2012), and new provincial policies aligned with this vision (Belanger & Gougeon, 2009; Killoran et al., 2013; Loreman, 2014b; Mackenzie & Kwong, 2016). For example, in New Brunswick, Policy 322 required mainstream learning environments for all students (Province of New Brunswick, 2013). As the vision of one system for all learners became a reality, there was a significant movement to close special schools (MacKay, 2006; Timmons, 2008), and for specialist supports to no longer be aligned with placement in special schools (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019). In some provinces, extensive, flexible support systems were developed that did not rely on disability categorisation (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019; Loreman et al., 2008), and compelling reasons were expected for withdrawal from the mainstream (MacKay, 2006; Porter & Richler, 1991). When students were withdrawn from the mainstream classroom, plans for re-entry were

essential and progress was monitored to ensure an early return (AuCoin et al., 2020; Porter et al., 2012).

Funding

Movement towards a unified education system has required significant investment (MacKay, 2006) and new funding models to support inclusion (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). Money was redirected from special schools to inclusive education (AuCoin et al., 2020; Belanger & Gougeon, 2009; Porter, 2008), and funding allocation moved away from the system of categorising students (MacKay, 2006). More inclusive approaches to funding included the provision of block funding for schools based on student enrolment, socioeconomic status and geography (Mackenzie & Kwong, 2016). It was recognised by some that all students must be accommodated regardless of funding or identification (Loreman et al., 2008). In Alberta, for example, funding was based on school population not qualification for funding, plus individual allocation based on need; funding models were designed to be flexible and to support inclusion (Irvine et al., 2010). Money and resources were allocated to support change and inclusive educational innovation (MacKay, 2006).

Collaboration

The impetus for special school closure has been sustained through the work and partnering of many stakeholders. Transformation has been a collaborative effort. Desegregation has required more than a top-down approach; leaders at all levels and partnerships between many different jurisdictions have been involved (AuCoin et al., 2020; Irvine et al., 2010; MacKay, 2006). Systemic transformation has also required robust accountability for the changes, with ongoing reviews, committees, analyses and evaluation of the implementation of legislative requirements (AuCoin et al., 2020; MacKay, 2006; Pivik et al., 2002; Van Wallegghem et al., 2013).

Importantly, recognising the difficulty of desegregation led to careful planning at the bureaucratic level. Such changes need time (Lupart & Webber, 2012; Porter, 2008). Long periods of sustained effort and a carefully orchestrated transition have been necessary, requiring extensive work to be carried out with school staff, parents and students (Timmons, 2008). Practical considerations have included support and professional development for teachers and teacher aides, and support measures were established in mainstream schools to coincide with special school closure (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019).

School level drivers of special school closure

Drivers at the school level include leadership, teacher attitudes, increasing teacher skills in inclusive practice and change in special education teacher roles.

Leadership

Leadership was a significant theme at the school level (Lupart, 2012; Porter et al., 2012) and principals have been key players in driving inclusive educational change (Irvine et al., 2010). Principled and effective leadership in schools has provided direction and energy for inclusive education reform (MacKay, 2006). Porter et al. (2012) described a close association between the values of school leaders and the strength of inclusive school practices.

Teacher attitudes

Without a positive attitudinal change in teachers, anchored in the belief that all students can succeed (AuCoin et al., 2020; Timmons, 2008), movements to close special schools would not have flourished. Examples of teacher attitudes necessary for a unified system include teachers' certainty that all students belong to them (Porter et al., 2012); inclusion perceived as the norm, just the way things are done (Lupart, 2012) and students with disability viewed in the same way as other students rather than 'special' (Loreman et al., 2008). Negative attitudes towards the experiences of students in special settings also contributed to the way mainstream teachers viewed their responsibility to students with disability (Somma, 2020).

Increasing teacher skills in inclusive practice

Examples of successful inclusion (Porter & Richler, 1991) and opportunities to witness the positive results of inclusive education (Somma, 2020), including improved academic results (AuCoin et al., 2020), have helped to drive reform. Educational innovations in mainstream schooling meant that the move away from segregated schooling was more possible (Aucoin et al., 2020; Lupart, 1998; Porter & Richler, 1991) and general teachers increasingly assumed the responsibility for all students, including those with disability (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019). For example, increasing use of strengths-based approaches (AuCoin et al., 2020), multilevel instruction, experiential learning (Porter & Richler, 1991) and individualised approaches (MacKay, 2006) made teaching to diversity more possible in mainstream classrooms and, it could be argued, the need for segregated provision less pressing. The growth of expertise and experience in inclusive education has been a significant driver of change in schools (Killoran et al., 2013; Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019; MacKay, 2006) and meant that 'front line educators' (Irvine et al., 2010, p. 71) have become key players in change after top-down initiatives set the ball in motion (Lupart, 2012).

Change in special education teachers' roles

Another important frontline factor has been the changing role of special education teachers (Porter & Richler, 2011). While classroom teachers were learning how to include students with disability, special education teachers were learning about teaching in mainstream classrooms (Somma, 2020), and their job focussed more on advice and support for classroom teachers than support for individual students

(AuCoin et al., 2020; Belanger & Gougeon, 2009; Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019; Porter et al., 2012). A special education knowledge base was preserved (Lupart, 2012), but to support heterogenous rather than special classes (MacKay, 2006; Porter & Richler, 2011). This finding might alleviate fears that closing special schools will threaten the jobs of special education teachers; rather, these teachers' expertise continued to be valued and utilised in new ways, thereby strengthening inclusive practice.

At the school level, it was more difficult to tease out drivers that have led to special school closure. There is clearly an association between inclusive education capacity and desegregation, but whether improved inclusive practice has been the product or driver of special school closure is hard to ascertain. On the one hand, Kopfer and Oskarsdottir (2019) argued that desegregation set in motion a developmental process towards inclusive practices in mainstream schools. In contrast, Irvine et al. (2010) argued that change at the grass roots level in mainstream schools came first.

Community level drivers of special school closure

Drivers at this level include the actions of parents and community organisations.

Parent advocacy

Raised expectations for their children with disability (Porter & Richler, 1991) and parental pressure to end segregation have played a pivotal part when Canadian special schools have closed (Loreman, 2014a; Lupart, 2012; MacKay, 2006; Porter & Richler, 2011; Szechtman, 2006; Timmons, 2008). Parents have held systems accountable for their actions through legislative means (Porter & Richler, 1991; Szechtman, 2006; Van Wallegghem et al., 2013); trained in advocacy (Porter & Richler, 1991) and banded together to collectively push for change (Irvine et al., 2010; Porter & Richler, 2011).

Community action

Parents were not alone in advocating for desegregation. Community organisations and advocacy groups have organised collective social action, public campaigns and political action to press for the closure of special schools and the development of a unified education system (Loreman, 2014a; Lupart, 2012; MacKay, 2006; Pivik et al., 2002; Porter & Richler, 1991, 2011; Sokal & Katz, 2015; Szechtman, 2006; Van Wallegghem et al., 2013).

Barriers to special school closure

Different educational frameworks and policies across the various provinces and territories have meant that the movement towards desegregation has not been consistent across Canada. It was clear in our analysis of the literature that segregation still

flourishes there alongside inclusive change, so it is critical to identify the barriers (as well as drivers) to special school closure. The following discussion follows the same structure used in the previous section on drivers of desegregation, albeit more broadly. We consider the factors that might hinder special school closure at societal, systemic, school and community levels.

Societal level barriers

First and foremost, at the societal level, we found reference to contradictions between inclusive education reforms and decisions made at higher levels. For example, litigation has ruled in favour of special school placements despite inclusive education laws and policies (Loreman, 2014a). Segregation has continued to be endorsed under some circumstances (Loreman, 2014b), an example of the powerful history and ongoing influence of institutionalisation (Loreman, 2014a) and the slow rate of change to societal norms (MacKay, 2006). A second barrier to desegregation in Canada has been the lack of federal power to dictate inclusive education policy nationally (Kohen et al., 2010; Loreman, 2014a; Lupart, 1998; Sokal & Katz, 2015; Timmons, 2008). Inclusive policies in Canada vary by province (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Pivik et al., 2002), with the larger, more urban regions being slower to change (Kohen et al., 2010; Timmons, 2008). Changing political leadership and fluctuating laws have also hindered the desegregation process (Lupart, 1998).

Systemic level barriers

At a systemic level, desegregation has been difficult to operationalise. A purported commitment to inclusive education reform is evident in the literature yet continued practices of segregation (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2008) are also reported, indicating implementation inconsistency at the systems level. There has been confusion over effective ways to transform the system (Lupart & Webber, 2012), and difficulties with disassembling the interdependent structures that have supported segregated services (MacKay, 2006; Sokal & Katz, 2015). Administrative hurdles and the complexity of developing an alternative system for providing support to students who need it (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019) have hindered moves to a unified system, and not the least of these hurdles has been the question of funding. A fear of losing funding (van Wallegghem et al., 2013), inadequate funding (Szechtman, 2006), how to apportion funding fairly (Porter et al., 2012) and the cost implications of a unified system (Irvine et al., 2010) can all be associated with the difficulty of special school closure. Independent, specialty schools specifically serving students with a disability (Allison et al., 2016) also pose a threat to a public desegregation movement.

School level barriers

At the school level, regulations might be well known but how to implement those regulations not always so (Belanger & Gougeon, 2009). Principals have not always

been able to understand or fulfil their responsibilities for students with disability (van Wallegghem et al., 2013) and have not been held accountable for their school's implementation of inclusive education (Killoran et al., 2013). Concerns that the unique contributions of the special education field will be lost (Lupart, 2012) and fear that inclusive education will water down standards (Porter, 2008) have hindered the commitment to closing special educational settings. Similar to the literature from other jurisdictions (e.g. in Australia as reported by Mavropoulou et al., 2021), resistance to desegregation in Canada has been fuelled by fears for the well-being and safety of students (Porter, 2008; Szechtman, 2006), the reluctance of some teachers (Lupart, 1998) and teacher union opposition (Porter & Richler, 1991).

Community level barriers

At the community level, several parental factors have hindered the move to special school closure in Canada. The first of these is the preference of some parents for special schools (MacKay, 2006). Canada is not alone here, and parental choice rationale is used widely to maintain a dual system of both special and mainstream options (e.g. Aspland et al., 2021). The argument of parental choice has been critiqued (see, e.g. Mann et al., 2015); however, this is a powerful dynamic in the inclusive education space and one that must be considered thoughtfully and with care in the process of special school closure. Second, parents worry about losing the gains made for students with disability should special schools close (Timmons, 2008). This worry is understandable given the extensive evidence of poor practice in schools that are not yet inclusive. Wide-ranging supports must be provided in schools during the transition process (including the specialised and individualised adjustments that some students will need in mainstream schools). Finally, Loreman (2014a) described the decision of some parents to home school their children with disability and suggested that this took the pressure off education systems to be accountable for the quality of schooling for students with disability.

Implications and recommendations

The Framework of Drivers for and Barriers to the Closure of Special Schools provides a structure and descriptive categories (Nilsen, 2015) that will be useful to inform policy and policy implementation in countries that strive to meet their obligations under the CRPD.

Implications at the societal level

Some Canadian provinces exemplify commitment to social justice for people with disability and leadership for inclusive education reform. Several lessons for desegregation can be learned from both these experiences and also the barriers that are evident in the Canadian literature. First, special school closure requires unequivocal political, educational and judicial leadership. It is governments that drive national

reforms for students with disability (Nevill & Savage, 2022). Second, a clear commitment to the decommissioning of special schools must be explicit in all legislative and policy documents, and validated through judicial systems where education systems are held accountable for upholding the rights of children with disability to an inclusive education. Third, inclusive education policies must be developed at national levels to avoid the fragmented responses that have occurred across different Canadian provinces. While legislation and policy did not guarantee inclusive education, robust, unambiguous laws and policies regarding students with disability were a firm foundation when special schools closed and inclusive practice progressed. Fourth, the Canadian experience also highlights the importance, and challenges, of attitudinal change. To that end, major public campaigns can assist in challenging outdated views about segregated schooling and raising community expectations for inclusive education for students with disability.

Implications at the systems level

Similar to drivers observed at the societal level, informed and inclusive education leaders are essential to drive desegregation and maintain momentum for capacity building in mainstream schools. A proactive approach is required for such a significant and complex change (MacKay, 2006). The Canadian story tells us that a careful transition plan for the decommissioning of special schools must be developed in collaboration with parents, teachers and other stakeholders, and that this will take time. Intentional campaigns regarding the move to a unified system will help to counteract fears and opposition, which, if unaddressed would possibly lead to an increase in independent special schools. The promotion of inclusive education as the default position for students with disability, alongside the development of flexible bureaucratic structures that enable inclusion are key lessons at the systems level in the Canadian experience. Additionally, reimagining funding models that do not privilege segregation is critical. To decrease segregated enrolment, key decisions are needed to cease funding for new special schools and segregated infrastructure and resources.

Implications at the school level

Leadership is, again, a factor at the school level, with ethical and inclusive leaders modelling, inspiring, expecting and being held accountable for inclusive practice within their schools. Under inclusive, ethical leadership (Ehrich & Carrington, 2018), positive teacher attitudes towards inclusive education (and a rejection of segregation) can be fostered. Alongside attitudinal change is a need for upskilling teachers—both general and special education. If special schools are to close, it is essential that all teachers see inclusion as possible, witness good practice and commit to inclusive educational change. Increased support for students and teachers in mainstream schools will be essential in the transition period. Increased and ongoing professional development and initial teacher training in inclusive practice will be critical alongside support and encouragement for inclusive educational innovation.

It will be a time for questioning the status quo, and for creative and courageous thinking.

Implications at the community level

Finally, we have learnt from the Canadian literature about the essential role of independent advocacy in keeping educators accountable for their inclusive practice. Without clear, objective parent and community advocacy, traditional justifications for segregated school are difficult to recognise and address. A key lesson, then, is that moves to a unified system will require support (and funding) for parent and community advocacy. Additionally, it will be essential to support parents who continue to seek enrolment in special schools. The argument of parental choice has been a significant barrier to special school closure in Canada (as it is elsewhere), and in the transition to a unified education system, the questions that parents raise need to be listened to and addressed.

Conclusion

There is extensive discussion on building inclusive capacity in schools; however, requirements for ending segregated schooling are less explored. Despite rhetorical commitment to inclusive education, and ratification of the CRPD, most governments have not yet tackled the complex transition to a unified system. As Porter declared many years ago, however, ‘[i]t is past time for educational leaders and policy makers to bite the bullet and purge our educational system of segregation and discrimination’ (2008, p. 2). A dual education system of both general and special schooling can no longer be justified, and we propose the Framework of Drivers for and Barriers to the Closure of Special Schools as a guide for achieving desegregation. Research will be needed to determine how this framework can be applied in the context of different countries, and we note that future research might identify issues regarding special school closure that are different to those highlighted through our framework.

We must now, alongside our efforts to develop inclusive practices in mainstream schools, urgently turn our attention to what is needed to close special schools. The Canadian experience provides useful insights into the process of closing special schools, despite, or perhaps because of, its inconsistent trajectory towards desegregation. While each context will be different, all jurisdictions can learn from Canada’s story (Harris et al., 2017). Special school closure under the guidance of committed, courageous and ethical leadership will drive and demand the creative and skilful educational innovation required in our future inclusive schools.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. This work was supported by the Centre for Inclusive Education (Queensland University of Technology). This

sponsor played no role in the study design, collection or analysis of data, the writing of the report, or in the decision to submit the article for publication.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no competing interests to declare.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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