

Inclusion: A Philosophical Ideal?

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Abstract

The Newfoundland (Canada) school system advocates the full inclusion of students with disabilities. Research suggests that the response of school personnel to the needs of students may be a determining factor in their success. Three studies (Kuester, 1989, 1999, 2001) on the attitudes of teachers, including physical educators, in the province have indicated a number of variables that affect these attitudes. Although attitudes towards inclusion may be generally positive, several difficulties and issues have been identified; including: lack of professional support, appropriate training, grade level of students, adequate resources and type of disability. Questions addressed in the paper will be: what are the conditions for full inclusion to work and what is the practice? This paper will theoretically explore the concept of inclusion based on the research to date.

Inclusion and the context

Schools do not function in isolation and reflect the beliefs, values and priorities of the society in which they function and as societies become more inclusive so do their institutions. For over two decades there has been growing recognition of the fundamental rights of all people to equity, citizenship, equality and participation in community, not only in Canada but internationally. Parents and advocates helped to bring deinstitutionalization and the closure of special schools and this in turn increased the number of students with exceptionalities in the school system (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; Lupart & Webber, 2002; Mittler, 2000; Philpott, 2002; Roher, 1999).

Today it appears that the inclusion of all regardless of disability is an inevitable rather than a necessary consequence of change and that what was once seen as the preserve of special education has become a responsibility of all educators (Canning, 1996; Lupart & Webber, 2002; Philpott, 2002; NLTA, 1998). The movement towards an inclusive unified school system whereby general and special education merge has continued since the 1980's. There are those who see this merger as the way to effectively meet the needs of all students but with different priorities and in times of fiscal restraint the two systems appear to be on a collision course. In the process of promoting that the two become one unified system emphasis on excellence in education has meant that special education struggles to promote educational equity (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; Lupart & Webber, 2002; NLTA, 1998; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Though there is approval of the philosophy underpinning inclusion this does not guarantee that inclusion will be successful as research suggests many factors which may affect whether or not the needs of those with exceptionalities will be met

(Lupart & Webber, 2002; Winzer, 1998; Kuester, 2000, 2003; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

Equal access by all to an appropriate education has brought changes in standardized curriculum, assessment, instruction, expectations of teachers and the involvement of communities (Lupart & Webber, 2002; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Change has meant an increased number of students with disabilities in community schools and advocates lobbying for full inclusion. The full support of all involved including parents, school administrators and teachers is required for successful inclusion and equal access to appropriate education (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Kuester, 1991, 2000, 2003). Evidence suggests that teacher attitude is a key factor in whether students will succeed (Kuester, 1991, 2000, 2003; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Teachers seem reluctant to teach such diverse group of students as they are expected to know more and teach students of very different abilities in the same classroom. Increased inclusionary practices indicate that administrators and classroom teachers are unprepared for the multifaceted challenges of inclusion. Concomitantly special educators are not confident that general education can meet the needs of all students. The debate over reform has at one end those who advocate for the full inclusion of all students and at the other end those who argue for a continuum of services. The latter proponents are concerned that general education is unable to provide an appropriate education for all those with special needs. There is also concern that the gains in specialized resources for special education could be lost (Canning, 1996; Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; Lupart & Webber, 2002; NLTA, 1998).

Newfoundland and Labrador Experience

Section 15 of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 states that: every individual is equal before and under the law, and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and in particular, without discrimination based on race, national and ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability (Poirier, Goguen, & Leslie, 1988, p. 25).

Canadian provinces are not bound by this Act to provide education for all children as they have complete jurisdiction in educational matters (Duquette & O'Reilly, 1988; Poirier et al., 1988). However, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador mandates that all school boards provide for the education of students with disabilities (Poirier et al., 1988; Special Education, 1999). The aims of education for all students are the same, that individuals be "enabled to achieve their fullest and best development both as private individuals and as members of human society" (Special Education Policy, 1999, p. ix). The government is committed to the delivery of services to meet the needs of all students and is fully supportive of the concept of inclusion whenever it will benefit the development of the individual student (Duquette & O'Reilly, 1988; Special Education Policy, 1999; Support Services, 2002).

Implementation

Mandatory provincial legislation and policies have resulted in gains for those with special needs however education is by teachers and others, including parents, not governments. The top down approach does not necessarily translate into the adoption of these policy directives at the grassroots level, the school, and ultimately the educational success of any student is dependent upon their day to day interactions with parents, teachers, and others in the school system. Research suggests that a determining factor in whether or not exceptional students will succeed is that all

personnel are onside but it would seem that educators and others are not always willing to include. One reason is that legislative and policy changes have resulted in the need for excessive preparation time and that this detracts from actual planning and teaching time for all students. Teachers also feel that they are inadequately prepared to teach all students in the regular class. A further problem is inadequate resources and inadequate provision for a continuum of appropriate services (Edmunds, 2000; Lupart & Webber, 2002; Kuester, 2000, 2003; NLTA, 1998; Philpott, 2002; Ministerial Panel, 2000).

The Royal Commission (1992) showed that though government policy is supportive of inclusion, with adequate resources, the actual theory and practice were somewhat different. Serious questions were raised about special education but not addressed until the Canning Report (1996). This identified numerous difficulties in the implementation of government policies. The closure of special schools had mainstreamed many students who had received little or no education and initially there were special units within community schools. Over time many of these students were included with their peers in the regular class and a difficulty identified was inadequate supports for successful inclusion. Even though there was a comprehensive special education policy specifying what should be available it was found to differ from board to board and even from school to school depending on how inclusion was seen by the administration. A cascade of services was recommended with the Individual Support Services Plan (ISSP) determining student placement and the services needed for student success. This model suggested that differing abilities and needs required different educational settings, not just inclusive, different curriculum and appropriate supports to meet individual needs (Canning, 1996; NLTA, 1998; Philpott, 2002; Ministerial Panel, 2000).

Present model

The present model, one of shared responsibility, stems from an interdepartmental review process concerning the delivery of services to families and children (Coordination of Services, 1996; Philpott, 2002). The goal was to make more efficient interventions by reducing duplication of services. As a result the ISSP became central to the present service model. The ISSP process for an individual can begin any time between birth and graduation from high school and parental involvement is a crucial aspect (Coordination, 1996; Special Education Policy, 1999; Support Services, 2002). 'Pathways' is the provincially prescribed model that determines the needs, resources and placement of students. This model has five categories of student including those who: can be educated in the regular class with supports (2); have an identifiable exceptionality and need modifications to the curriculum with support (3); have significant learning difficulties requiring an individualized curriculum (4); have a severe developmental delay requiring an alternate programme (5). As much as possible all students will be included in the regular class with their peers. However, there is concern that this model excludes some students who previously qualified for supports yet the cascade model recommended a broadening rather than a tightening of criteria requirements for supports (Canning, 1996; Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; NLTA 1998; Pathways, 1998).

As elsewhere, the number of students requiring services has increased significantly to 14% of the provincial school population (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; Philpott, 2002; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Structural reforms created high expectations for improved teaching and learning and though teachers support the principle of inclusion and

Pathways some are frustrated at their inability to teach all students because of the diversity of needs in the regular class. Indeed there are those, including parents, who feel that for students with severe cognitive and behavioural disorders the most appropriate educational setting is a segregated one. Also not all those who teach an individual are necessarily a part of the ISSP process and therefore feel ill-prepared to teach such a student (Canning, 1996; Doherty, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Ministerial Panel, 2000; Winzer, 1998).

Pathways and the ISSP process is now a shared responsibility of all educators as well as others, including parents, and there is concern that the process is bureaucratic, time consuming and detracts from quality teaching of all students. Though more students are identified as needing special services there are others who appear to miss out because of the whole process of identification (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; NLTA, 1998; Ministerial Panel, 2000). It has been recommended that; the ISSP and Pathways documentary process be substantially simplified; all educational personnel be in-serviced on their responsibilities and implementation of Pathways; clear policy guidelines concerning the expectations of all individuals involved in the ISSP process be established; the whole process be monitored and issues identified with appropriate responses, by government, school boards and the NLTA (NLTA, 1998; Philpott, 2002; Ministerial Panel, 2000).

Some advocate for a continuum of services whereas others insist on full inclusion for all. The cascade model allows for separate settings for some students (Canning, 1996). Research indicates that teachers and others are less positive in their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with severe cognitive and/or multiple disability and emotional/behavioural disorder. Such students are perceived by teachers as too challenging for the regular class and that they may disrupt the education of others (Kuester, 1991, 2000, 2003; Lupart & Webber, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Winzer, 1998). Presently there are students within the province with severe to profound cognitive deficits who are educated in specialized units within their community school while others, with severe emotional/behavioural disorders, are educated in alternate settings away from their community school. There are those including parents, teachers, administrators and other professionals who feel that students who exhibit disruptive behaviours and/or have difficulty in traditional educational settings are more appropriately placed in such environments (Crosbie, Luscombe, & Vardy, 2001; Doherty, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Though there is a shared responsibility model of education government has decided that specialized units for those with severe cognitive disabilities will be closed and such students integrated into their community schools. Presently resources are available for these specialized units but as the needs of such students are very individual it is felt that neighbourhood schools will lack appropriate resources for integration, particularly as there may be only one or two such students in a neighbourhood school. The government response to expressed concerns is that all students have the right to attend their neighbourhood school and will be supported (Crosbie, Luscombe, & Vardy, 2001; Doherty, 2003; Jackson, 2001; NLTA, 1998). Parents know their children best and are part of the ISSP partnership yet are not being listened to in terms of what they believe is best for their children. If one student's education in the inclusive environment is jeopardized then is it inclusion? Does ideology sometimes take precedence over reality and what is best for individuals?

Curriculum

Though students with exceptionalities are being educated in inclusive settings educational reform has also created curriculum challenges. In a class with a diverse population the regular teacher needs to individualize material for all to learn successfully. The older the student the more difficult this becomes as the provincial curriculum has specific outcomes not attainable by all students (Canning, 1995). In general a regular educator uses group instruction to teach a class and seems unwilling or unable to modify instructional techniques and strategies so that all might learn. Yet research shows that such accommodations can determine whether or not a student will succeed (Lupart & Webber, 2002; Winzer, 1998). Canning (1995) indicated that instead of expecting school personnel to modify existing or develop alternate curriculum specific curricula should be developed by curriculum experts for those with exceptionalities, particularly in the higher grades. The responsibility for developing curricula should not rest with schools but should be developed by the Department of Education so as to adequately meet the needs of all students (Canning, 1995; NLTA, 1998). An integrated way of developing and delivering curricula would enhance teaching and learning for all. Such curricula could be used as a guide and be modified to individual needs by the regular educator and others thus enhancing their ability to teach all students.

Resources

Research suggests that for students with exceptionalities to succeed in an inclusive setting adequate resources including: student aides; special educators; other resource personnel including occupational, physical and speech therapists; visual and hearing impaired teachers; school psychologists; and equipment are required (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; Winzer, 1998). Parents and others demand additional supports and all responsible for the education of a student, increasingly depend on specialised services. However, studies indicate that there are not always appropriate and adequate supports available for meaningful inclusion in the Provincial context (Kuester, 2000, 2003; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Inclusion has changed the role of both regular and special educators. Exceptional students for the most part are now the responsibility of the regular educator and the special educator is seen more and more as a resource person. Education of these students is now purportedly a collaborative effort of all teachers, specialists, parents and student aides rather than just the special educator. At the same time there appear to be insufficient special educators and other specialists to meet the needs of all students and even where there are such there are not enough to support all students with disabilities (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001; NLTA, 1998; Kuester, 2000, 2003). It has been strongly recommended that special educators and other support staff, as well as the regular educator, should be fully engaged in the direct instruction of students. A further recommendation is that in addition to student aides there are suitably trained and qualified teacher aides able to meet a wide range of individual and educational needs in the regular class. This would assist the regular educator in enabling all students to learn (NLTA, 1998; Ministerial Panel, 2000)

Training

The literature suggests that a major factor in whether inclusion will be successful is the preparation of teachers and other support staff. Consistently, research by Kuester (1991, 2000, 2003) confirms research which indicates teachers believe that quality training will enable them to more effectively teach all students. Professional development including field experiences with those with disabilities has been found to lead to more positive attitudes as well as greater perceived teacher confidence (Lupart

& Webber, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Although Pathways and the ISSP became the model many teachers still feel that they are inadequately prepared to successfully implement, monitor and individualize curricula for exceptional students (Canning, 1996; NLTA, 1998; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Recommendations to government are that professional development is essential for all teachers and must be ongoing and comprehensive as this will provide and maintain a qualified and motivated teaching force (NLTA, 1998; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Presently the provincial education degree does not require the vast majority of teachers to take any special needs courses, only those majoring in physical education are required to take one course, while those who teach special needs undertake a special education degree. Yet inclusion requires that all teachers be 'special educators' in order to facilitate successful learning of all students. As well as having expertise on particular disabilities special education has developed individualized curricula, instructional and assessment methods which need to become a part of all teachers methodology (Lupart & Webber, 2002; Winzer, 1998). As all teachers are now responsible for all students then all teachers as well as others need to be thoroughly prepared by ongoing professional development if inclusion of all is to be realised.

Financial

A further challenge faced by the educational system in attempts to educate exceptional students is that of fiscal responsibility. Nationally many believe that funding for special education is inadequate (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001). Even though Newfoundland is not a rich province it has seen profound changes in the education of students with exceptionalities, in the past 25 years. The closure of special schools and the movement toward inclusive education for all has meant increased funding requirements in terms of human and other resources, facilities, equipment, and professional development (Canning, 1996; NLTA, 1998; Philpott, 2002). However, fiscal restraints have meant that some needs are not always met adequately. Human, as well as other resources cost money and the more severe a disability the more supports are required if the student is to benefit from inclusion (Doherty, 2003; Jackson, 2001; NLTA, 1998; Ministerial Panel, 2000). Perhaps the changes in criteria for special needs designation, so that not all students receive adequate supports, are due to financial restraints. Equally lack of professional supports and adequate professional and curriculum development may be due to lack of funds.

Conclusion

Most agree with the philosophy of inclusion, with adequate supports, for all students. Change requires sustained leadership by all involved in the process. Though provincial legislation and policy change supports inclusion the actual practice and theory do not always match. Inclusion does not end once a student is placed in the regular class. It is an unending process dependent upon continuous changes in pedagogy, curriculum, methodology and organization. Many factors including beliefs and attitudes, professional development, resources, curriculum and financial ability impact on the delivery of services to all students. Whereas some advocate for a continuum of services others advocate that all, regardless of disability, be included with their peers. In an ideal world attitudes can be impacted positively but we live in a real world of differences. Inclusion implies that we are all responsible for the education of our citizens so that they may take their rightful place in that society. Is it possible that all education is special and that we need to educate society of this fact so that we may achieve equity for all whether this be through an inclusive educational

model or another? Who is right or is there no one right and is it possible that different needs can be met in different ways?

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