Oh, Canada: bridges and barriers to inclusion in Canadian schools

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Inclusion in Canadian schools, both academic and social, is explored through the historic legislative structures that have resulted in a diversity of approaches to meeting the educational needs of Canadians. Innovative programmes that have been developed which showcase Canadian commitment to inclusive academic and social practices are described. Finally, we explore some of the challenges that Canadians are facing in truly being inclusive in our educational practices, and we make three specific recommendations about how we can become more inclusive.

***Key words*: Inclusive education, Canada, innovation, challenges.**

In 1985, Canada clearly signalled that it valued equity for all its citizens when it became the first country in the world to include the rights of persons with physical and mental disabilities in its Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Council of Canadians with Disabilities, 2012). While it might appear that this development was a harbinger of a commitment to develop systems that would support full participation of all Canadian citizens, the necessary actions required to support this legislation have been slow in developing. Furthermore, the infrastructure necessary to ensure the goal of equity is not yet in place, especially in schools. In this article, we will begin by clarifying what we view as 'inclusion', and then go on to explore the historic legislative structures that have resulted in a diversity of approaches to meeting the educational needs of Canadian students with exceptionalities. Next we will describe some 'bright lights' – programmes that

have been developed which showcase Canadian innovations and commitment to inclusive academic and social practices. Finally, we will explore some of the challenges that Canadians are facing in truly being inclusive in our educational practices, and we will make three specific recommendations about how Canada may develop more inclusive educational systems.

What is inclusion?

'Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school' (Inclusive Education Canada, n.d.). In addition to the notion that inclusion embodies the concept of all children being educated in common settings with their age-matched peers, a philosophy of inclusion is concerned with both the academic and social processes in those settings. Canadian researchers Katz, Porath, Bendu and Epp (2012) defined academic inclusion as all students having full participation in the academic experiences of the classroom, including learning experiences with peers that are not separate or parallel to those of their classmates and that are not based solely on interactions with adults. Likewise, they defined social inclusion as each child being a full and respected member of the classroom community, including feelings of belonging, of being cared for and of being a part of something larger than themselves. In Canada, legislation and policy work has mainly focused on fulfilling the rights to academic inclusion while largely remaining silent on social inclusion in schools.

National legislation and provincial policy

Thirty years ago, national legislation in the form of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 1985) and the Canadian Human Rights Act (1982) entrenched the rights of Canadian citizens, including those with disabilities. More specifically, section 15 of the Charter provides 'equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination for women, visible minorities, persons with disabilities and gay/lesbian and transgendered groups' (Government of Canada, 1985).

In Canada there are ten provinces and three territories, which must uphold the national legislation through their provincial acts, including those related to

education. In contrast to the United States where a national education strategy is more overt, in Canada each province and territory is responsible for its own education curriculum and policy. This organisational structure is a historical artefact, enshrined in the British North American Act (Canada, 1956) as a way to ensure that French and English settlers could preserve their language and cultural heritage within their provincial education systems. While this structure has fostered regional policies and curricula that are responsive to the diverse needs of Canadians, it has also created disharmony between the provinces with regard to the ways in which the needs of students with exceptionalities are met. This structure has allowed some stellar educational programmes to develop while at the same time stifling the development of a cohesive, comprehensive, national approach to ensuring inclusion is practiced in all Canadian schools (Timmons and Wagner, 2008).

Once the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 1985) was in place, some provinces were quicker than others to create provincial acts to support the national legislation. In addition, provinces varied in terms of the degree to which they met or exceeded the expectations outlined in the Charter. For example, Manitoba created the Public Schools Amendment Act (Appropriate Educational Programming) in 2005, and was the last province to create 'legislation that explicitly mandated the expectations for appropriate education for students' (Van Welleghem and Lutfiyya, 2013, p. 2). This provincial legislation was 20 years in the making, but it mandated inclusion as the main approach to education for all children. Manitoba followed up its legislation with a broad collection of standards that were intended to put the Act into action in ways that were accessible to school administrators, teachers and parents. The province of New Brunswick was one of the provinces that was quicker to respond to the Charter, and in fact has already revised its initial legislation with a more specific document that explicitly prohibits 'segregated, self-contained programs or classes for students with learning or behavioural challenges, either in school or in community-based learning opportunities' (Government of New Brunswick, 2013). This document mandates a common learning environment for all students, making it one of the stronger inclusive legislation documents in Canada. While the New Brunswick policy prohibits segregation, it does consider instances where environments other than common environments better meet students' learning needs. It sets a high standard to implement such alternate environments, however, listing eight criteria that must be met in those circumstances (Lattanzio, 2013).

So, has Canada fulfilled its promised and legislated obligation to equal education? A recent study of the current educational placements of students with special learning needs has suggested that we are still far from our goal of inclusive education across Canada in terms of physical, academic and social inclusion (Timmons and Wagner, 2008). Timmons and Wagner showed that smaller provinces such as New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are leading the way to inclusion, with approximately half their students with special needs in highly inclusive settings, defined as placement in neighbourhood schools, students' involvement in extra-curricular and school activities, the availability of supports within the classroom and parental involvement. Other provinces, including the largest ones in Canada, are trailing and have approximately 33% of their students with exceptionalities in highly inclusive settings (Timmons and Wagner, 2008). Thus, while many students in Canada may be physically included in general education classrooms, many are not receiving the supports needed to truly be socially and academically successful and included with their peers.

Canada undertook a leadership role in drafting legislation nearly 30 years ago that would protect the rights of its citizens with disabilities, and followed it with provincial legislation that supported the national acts. All provinces and territories now have a legislated commitment to inclusion in principle, although the ways their programmes demonstrate inclusive ideals vary in type, degree and quality. The most recent statistics about the educational settings most common for students with disabilities have verified that inclusion is still a goal, rather than a reality, in Canadian schools (Timmons and Wagner, 2008).

Innovative programming

Successful inclusion requires that attention be paid to both the social and academic participation of students with exceptionalities, and in fact all students, in the life of the classroom and school (Katz, 2013; Koster *et al*., 2009). Achieving inclusive education involves changes in policy, curricula, systemic structures and instructional practices. In Canada, as noted above, policies have been put into place in every province that, while not perfect, universally advocate for inclusive classroom placement as the primary and most desirable option, with only very rare exceptions. Educational ministries across the country have also been working toward changes in curricula, assessment, reporting, funding and professional development that would further support the implementation of inclusive

education. Despite, or perhaps because of, a lack of a national strategy for inclusion, 'boutique' programmes have been introduced within various provinces that serve as exemplars of the innovative and creative ways that Canadians are approaching academic and social inclusion.

Academic inclusion

In British Columbia, for instance, the provincial Ministry of Education has undertaken a significant revamping of curricula and assessment practices related to personalized learning and universal design for learning. Entitled the 'BC Education Plan', the policy lays out five main goals that are designed to increase flexibility and personalisation, as well as the implementation of technology to personalize instruction for all children (see http://www.bcedplan.ca/theplan.php). Cross-curricular competencies are emphasised in curricula, and the number of learning outcomes has been significantly reduced to allow for teacher discretion in learning foci (BC Ministry of Education, 2011). Similarly, Alberta has recently issued a new ministerial order that emphasizes personalization of curricula and programming and inclusive practices (Alberta Education, 2013). Other provinces are also examining curricula and assessment practices.

To varying degrees, provinces are exploring pedagogical approaches to addressing the increasing diversity within their classrooms. Exposure to these approaches has been aided by our close proximity to the United States. Co-teaching models, Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson, 2001), Understanding by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) and Universal Design for Learning (Rose and Gravel, 2010) have been the focus of teacher professional development sessions in Canada and are beginning to be implemented in classrooms across the country. These school division-level approaches, through their responsiveness to the inherent diversity in inclusive classrooms – in addition to curricular changes mandated at the provincial level – are moving Canada further toward meeting the learning needs of all students.

Social inclusion

While Ministries of Education from various provinces have crafted curricular changes as a way to mandate and support more academically inclusive practices,

their legislation and policies have not generally addressed issues of social inclusion. It is noteworthy that in the absence of such requirements or policies, many school boards and teachers have searched for and implemented school division-wide programming to meet the social needs of their students (for example, see Santos *et al.* 2011 for a discussion of the Roots of Empathy model). This situation speaks to the perceived necessity of such programming by teachers, administrators, families and the students themselves. Community/school programmes that enlist support services, families and cultural elders are becoming common in inner-city schools (e.g. Cavanagh, 2014). It is not uncommon to see representatives from health, social services and education working co-operatively with community groups (for examples see CACL) to move the inclusive education agenda forward. Specific, inventive programming is evident across several provinces. For example, in Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, and New Brunswick, Katz' (2012) Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been adopted in some school divisions, and both the Manitoba and New Brunswick ministries of education have promoted its implementation. The Three-Block Model involves programming that supports students' self-concept, valuing diversity, belonging and social inclusion, in addition to instructional practices that support academic inclusion. Other programs aimed specifically at younger students, such as Roots of Empathy (Gordon, 2005), are also in evidence, reflecting elements of character education such as developing empathy and responsibility. While not part of the mandated provincial curriculum, this programme has been widely adopted and has been shown to be effective across different school divisions (Santos *et al.*, 2011). Responsive classrooms (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2013) and Restitution programmes (Gossen, 2013) are also popular as means of developing social and emotional learning in children and youth across Canada. Recently, the social inclusion of post-secondary students has also received attention. Queen's University has served as a leader in suicide prevention work and has developed programming to welcome and create a sense of belonging and inclusion for all their incoming students as a way to promote social well-being on campus (Queen's University, 2012). In collaboration with community organisations such as the Alberta and Manitoba Associations for Community Living, several universities in Alberta and Manitoba have created programmes that welcome students with significant disabilities – including those with severe intellectual disabilities and autism – into university courses. Thus, the 'grass roots' movement that recognised social inclusion for students as a necessary component of an inclusive philosophy has now spread beyond the K-12 school environment, reflecting the desire for a more inclusive society.

The Canadian Association for Community Living has been a vocal advocate for inclusion and has served as a link between provincial ministries and services (CACL, n.d.). The CACL, and its provincial affiliates, advocate that 'all people with intellectual disabilities are fully included with their peers in regular education, with appropriate supports from early childhood through to post-secondary and adult life-long learning' (CACL, n.d.). The CACL publishes a newsletter called *Education Watch,* which is available on its website. This website and the postings of the newsletters provide a venue for educators to keep updated on developments within other provinces.

Barriers

Although Canadian educators are mandated to provide inclusive education and, in general, agree with the concept of inclusion, this legislation and change in attitude has been developed within an infrastructure where segregation – physical, academic and social – is still accepted. 'Pull-out' programmes, where students receive special education services in settings other than the classroom, still exist in all school districts across Canada. As such, student funding formulas, teacher in-service education and educational approaches in schools often reflect a school philosophy other than inclusion. In essence, many provinces are now asking how they can move toward a system that reflects inclusion. Co-ordination of several systems will be required to disassemble the interdependent structure that has supported segregated services and to replace it with systems that serve children and youth in inclusive educational settings. Furthermore, multi-directional, interactive processes will be necessary between all levels and departments of government, such as education, health and family services. For the purposes of this discussion, we focus on three areas that we believe will need particular attention: teacher education, funding processes and mental health issues.

Teacher education

Teachers are key to successful inclusion, and as such they are important partners in the change process (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Pijl and Frissen, 2009). However, while the provincial ministries have established standards for pre-service teacher education and certification regarding inclusion, in-service teacher professional development foci are established by school divisions, and often by

teachers themselves according to union contracts. Until recently, many certification standards did not include required courses related to inclusive education. For example, it was not until 2008 that pre-service teachers in Manitoba were required to take 60 contact hours of coursework about 'diversity education'. It is common for 30 or 60 contact hours of instruction within Canadian teacher certification programmes to be devoted to diversity education – which can include second-language learners, poverty issues, Aboriginal education and other issues. Thus, while some students will choose to take courses in the education of students with disabilities, others will select alternate foci for their diversity credits. As a result, not all pre-service teachers receive specific training in working with students with exceptionalities. As evidence, Sokal and Sharma (2014) recently found that 43% of currently practising Manitoba teachers reported having taken no courses on how to teach students with diverse needs, and 38% of practising teachers are not confident in their skills in this area. This finding is especially troubling when one considers that 94% of current Manitoba teachers are teaching in classrooms that include children with special needs.

Recent research has suggested a general trend that teachers in all provinces and territories are open to and requesting more professional development about inclusive teaching practices – and indeed have been advocating for this training for decades (Thompson *et al*. 2014). These researchers found that most teachers were in support of inclusion in principle, but their support was contingent on having adequate resources, including teacher training, to ensure they could make inclusion work. Thompson, Lyons and Timmons termed this the 'awareness–endorsement–resources' paradigm. Despite their general support for inclusion in principle, without adequate resources – including teacher training – teachers are less supportive of inclusion. Mittler (2003) found that the most significant barrier to inclusion is negative attitudes in teachers, parents and administrators.

One of the most effective ways to change attitudes is through teacher education (Forlin and Hopewell, 2006). Jordan *et al*. (2009) showed that pedagogy that is effective with children with special learning needs is often also effective with other children. They found that

> 'what may be needed in both teacher education and in-service preparation is to challenge teachers' beliefs about ability and disability as immune to learning, and their resulting beliefs about their roles and responsibilities, as well as their epistemological beliefs about the nature of knowing, knowledge and the process of acquiring knowledge.' (p. 541)

If pre-service teachers do not receive training in inclusive education, and in-service teachers are not exposed to training through continuing professional development, we are not challenging their pre-determined beliefs and not effectively utilising one of the main change mechanisms by which inclusion can become accepted and enacted by teachers. We recommend that teacher training about teaching students with and without exceptionalities together in inclusive settings be a mandated requirement of all universities and school divisions for both pre-service and in-service teachers, in every province and territory in Canada.

Funding processes

Student funding programmes across Canada are categorical, dependent on the level of modification and support needed by students. Although schools receive global funding intended to partially address high-incidence conditions such as ADHD within the regular school funding base, school divisions also receive additional funding to support students with exceptionalities based on documentation of a particular disability. This process oftentimes involves a time-consuming and stressful application process, with no guarantee of success. Funding application processes based on a specific child or youth's disability result in a widespread belief that the funding, if awarded, 'comes with the child', and most often results in educator and parent beliefs that the student then requires, or is entitled to, an educational assistant. This belief limits flexibility and creativity in individualising supports, creates dependency rather than facilitating independence and often results in social stigmatisation (Giangreco, 2010; Katz *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the need to emphasise students' deficits in order to acquire funding often breaks the relationship between teachers and parents, as parents must sign a funding application that paints their child in a very negative light. This process is completely counter-productive to our desire as educators to build relationships with families and communities. New funding formulas are beginning to be developed; in Alberta, for instance, the 'Inclusive Education Funding' grant (Alberta Education, 2012) has now replaced categorical/individual student funding except for students with extremely complex needs who require multiple ministerial department services. This model provides block funding based on enrolment, socio-economic, diagnostic and geographical variables. School divisions then have the flexibility to explore creative methods of supporting students with exceptionalities. For instance, personalized technology, co-teaching classrooms, lower class sizes and other supports have been shown to meet many students' needs better than the automatic assignment of an educational assistant (Giangreco, 2010). It will take

time for funding models to be reflected in practice, as both parents and educators come to understand the utility of options other than educational assistants; however, these funding models open the door to flexible and professional decision making related to services for students with exceptionalities.

Mental health issues

One of the areas of exceptionality that is now receiving significant and rising attention in Canada is mental health. While 'hidden disabilities' such as mental health are less apparent than some of the physical disabilities that have received attention in the past, their costs to students and to Canada as a country are monumental. Similar to other countries, mental health issues in Canadian children are now more prevalent than physical health issues (Santos, 2013). Furthermore, over 70% of mental health issues begin in childhood or adolescence (Government of Manitoba, 2011), suggesting that the school system is an integral partner in working with health care professionals to understand and address the needs of these students. Schools and Ministries of Education and Health are responding to these challenges. For example, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (2013) has drafted a position paper on this issue, and a plan is in place to meet these needs (for example see Government of Manitoba, 2011). Moreover, most provincial funding programmes include categories for students who are experiencing mental health issues and behavioural challenges. Supports for these students range from mental health workers, guidance counsellors and school psychologists to segregated settings and family outreach. While these initiatives are welcomed and do address a need to respond to students in crisis, little has been done in preventative work with the school population at large – a direction for which research has long advocated (Hymel *et al.*, 2006). Consistent, preventative programming that addresses social inclusion/exclusion and social and emotional learning across classrooms, schools, regions and socio-economic status (that is, that notes there are wealthy children with mental health, social and behavioural challenges, too) is rare. Boutique programmes that address social inclusion, such as those previously discussed, are making a difference (Katz and Porath, 2011). We advocate broader implementation of such programmes and propose that social–emotional outcomes should be privileged on a par with academic outcomes in the mandated curriculum. These types of programmes should not be optional or viewed as an addition to the regular curriculum; rather, they should be honoured as essential support for the social and emotional health of Canada's youngest citizens.

Final thoughts

As Canadians, we are proud that our government was the first to include the rights of persons with disabilities in its Charter. Evidence suggests that we have made progress toward keeping the promise of the full rights of citizenship, including the commitment to equal rights and benefits related to schooling for all citizens. The historical structure of provincial and territorial control over education has served as a double-edged sword – stifling a national, legislated movement toward inclusion in educational settings, while at the same time allowing innovation and creativity in programming to flourish. In order to harness the momentum of such programmes, it is important that Canadians renew their commitment to equal rights for all citizens by addressing some of the artefacts of a time when segregation in educational settings was accepted as the norm. In particular, we advocate for mandated teacher education and training for all teachers, both pre-service and in-service; we urge ministries to become more creative in the ways funding processes are organized and to move away from child-specific funding processes; and finally, we advise that social inclusion should be given more precedence as a means to address social–emotional well-being and to promote mental health in Canadian students. In these ways, we believe the promise of equal rights and benefits for our students, made 30 years ago, will be achieved.

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