

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESSFUL INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THREE KEY INGREDIENTS REVEALED

Gordon L. Porter¹

Inclusive Education Canada
glporter@nbnet.nb.ca

Abstract

Inclusive education has been the subject of discussion among policy makers, educators and parents for more than 30 years. In this article a definition of inclusive education is suggested and the development of inclusion as a critical concept is described. The continuing gap between theory and practice is connected to the need for further action to make inclusive schooling a reality. Three key ingredients of a recipe to advance inclusive education are revealed: the commitment and capacity of teachers and parents; the linkage between implementing inclusive education strategies and school improvement; and finally, the power of peer relationships in inclusive classrooms.

Keywords: Inclusion; School improvement; Peers; Education.

Resumo

A educação inclusiva tem sido objecto de discussão entre os decisores políticos, educadores e pais por mais de 30 anos. Neste artigo, uma definição de educação inclusiva é sugerida e o desenvolvimento da inclusão é descrito como um conceito crítico. O contínuo hiato entre teoria e prática está ligada à necessidade de mais medidas para fazer a Escola inclusiva uma realidade. Três ingredientes chave de uma receita para fazer avançar a educação inclusiva são revelados: o compromisso e a

¹ Gordon L. Porter, C.M., LL.D. is the Director of Inclusive Education Canada. He received the Canadian Education Association's Whitworth Award for Research in Education in 2007 and was inducted into the Order of Canada in 2010. He recently co-edited the book, "Exploring Inclusive Educational Practices Through Professional Inquiry." The book contained of 25 case studies. It was published by SENSE in 2011. In June 2012, the Minister of Education in New Brunswick released the report, "Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools", co-authored by Dr. Porter.



capacidade de professores e pais; a ligação entre a implementação de estratégias de educação inclusiva e de melhoria da escola; e finalmente, o poder das relações entre pares nas salas de aula inclusivas.

Palavras-chave: Inclusão; Melhoria da escola; Pares; Educação.

Beginnings

To begin on a personal note, my career in education encompasses more than four enjoyable and fulfilling decades. The first dozen years were dedicated to being a teacher and school principal. Even then my interest was in students who did not learn as well as expected. Gradually my focus shifted to those students.

At first the school system referred to this focus as Special Education, latter changed to Student Services. In New Brunswick where I live, the focus is now referred to as Education Support Services.

In the last three decades, efforts have been to make schools more effective for a diverse student population. The term Integration gave way to the term Inclusion. Not everyone accepted the idea of inclusion.

Definition of Inclusive Education

My working definition of inclusive education is simple. Students attend the same “community school”² as siblings and peer groups in age-appropriate regular classes.

Students receive support to meet their diverse needs. Teachers receive support to personalize instruction and implement strategies to ensure successful learning for all students. As a result, a school is “inclusive” not “exclusive.” The process enhances the capacity of the school to serve all students.

² “Community school” might differ from one jurisdiction to another. A neighborhood public school, a private school or some other family selected school would be the same if a child with a special need or disability were not a factor.



Gaining Acceptance

Education experts and policy officials have denied, resisted, rationalized, argued, debated, and scorned the idea of inclusion and the people who promoted it. At professional meetings or conferences in the late 1980s, critics of inclusion invariably outnumbered supporters of inclusion. Support for inclusion has changed and increased – and thankfully so.

Inclusion is now in the main supported, at least in theory if not in practice. In Canada, a group of more than 20 academics at universities across the country have formed a cooperative research network focused on inclusive education. It is encouraging to have this group conducting research to discover the best practices for making inclusion work effectively for students and teachers. Inclusive Education Canada and our network of associates are pleased to be working with this group on strategies to share their knowledge with the broader educational community.

The future of inclusion in Canada does indeed look positive. A recent Supreme Court of Canada decision has added to this optimism.³ With further efforts, there is every reason to believe that the future of inclusion can look better on an international level as well. However, wherever one looks there continues to be a significant gap between research and day-to-day school practices.

Practice and Research

The day-to-day programs and practices in schools in Canada and other countries lag significantly behind the research. In many communities the sense is that the gap is growing, not declining. Some school districts continue to invest increasing portions of their funding to segregated and self-contained special education in an attempt to keep the traditional structure viable. There is an emerging consensus that this is not working satisfactorily for the education system or for the students that it attempts to serve. Academic and research discourse has not resulted in the educational community assuring that practice consistently follows evidence-based practices.

From my perspective, there are three practical ingredients of school practice that if effectively utilized can serve to close this gap and support inclusive practice in

² *Moore v. British Columbia (Education)*. Supreme Court of Canada, November 9, 2012.



schools and classrooms. They are drawn from both my own work and experience over the last three decades as well as the research evidence available.

But first I want to suggest a definition of inclusive education.

Concept of Ingredients

Every successful program or practice has factors that can be identified as key ingredients that ensure success and contribute to a recipe that works. It is true in recipes for food and it is true for inclusive education.

My experience confirms that the three key ingredients to successful inclusive education are: Parents and Teachers Ingredient; School Improvement Ingredient; and All Children Ingredient.

Three Key Ingredients of Inclusive Education

Parents and Teachers Ingredient

Parents want their children included in school just as they want them included in their families. To support the school system and its personnel, parents need to know that there is a commitment to the wellbeing of their children. Parents need to feel part of the education process and play an important part in it since they know their children best. Parents need to feel welcome from the start. Teachers and parents need to be partners and collaborate to assure the best results in both school and home.

An obvious requirement for parents to support this partnership is that school leaders and teachers have the professional skills and capacity to meet the learning needs of their children.

Teachers need to make inclusion work in the school and the classroom. In New Brunswick, and indeed in Canada, teachers support inclusion. Good teachers already know most of what they need to know to make inclusion successful in their classrooms. However, even highly effective teachers will need personal and systemic support to meet the diverse needs of their students. For example, teachers may need assistance with some elements of a program for a given child whose specific needs are new to them, or they may need to use specific pedagogical strategies they have not used before.



A poll of almost 5000 teachers was conducted recently in New Brunswick.⁴ Teachers identified professional collaboration as their most essential need. This includes collaboration with specialist/resource teachers, with other classroom teachers and with parents. Efforts are needed to prioritize the employment and deployment of support staff. In collaboration with their peers, there is a need to support teachers in identifying obstacles and strategies connected to teaching and learning.

The good news is that this vital ingredient of parent and teacher collaboration is already available in every school community. The challenge is to nurture and use it and shape this collaboration into a powerful force for improvement.

School Improvement Ingredient

There are many ways to make the case for inclusion in schools. Among the arguments made by advocates for inclusion are the following:

- Right Thing to Do;
- Human Rights;
- Efficiency Factor (including funding);
- Health Factors;
- Social Factors; and
- Community Cohesion.

Like many supporters of inclusion, I have used most of these arguments in one version or another over the years. While a valid case can be made for them all, my focus has more recently turned to another approach.

My perspective is that making schools inclusive is a powerful way to make the school stronger and more effective for all children in the system. This perspective can be summed up the phrase, “Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools.”

My colleague Angèle AuCoin and I used that phrase as the title of our June 2012 report and action plan for inclusive education in New Brunswick.⁵ We have found the phrase resonates with school leaders and with teachers. Our premise or point of view

⁴ Survey of Teachers Participating in Professional Development Day on Inclusive Education in Anglophone schools in New Brunswick, October 9, 2012, New Brunswick Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development.

⁵ “Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools” (2012) Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development, Province of New Brunswick, Porter & AuCoin.
Link: www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/comm/Inclusion.pdf



is that when schools develop systems and practices that accommodate the diverse needs of all students, the whole school is better. And better means it is more effective for ALL students.

Developing a learning environment that accommodates the diverse social and personal needs of all students requires leadership. School leaders need to see that students and teachers are supported by practical strategies we have learned make a difference as we implement an inclusion program.⁶ Examples of activities are: establishing an inclusive school climate; assuring highly effective leadership; joint planning with parents; capacity building with teachers; establishing a support teacher role for special education teachers; problem-solving strategies; focus on teaching/learning strategies, including universal design for learning; building collaborative structures in the school; and, building partnerships with the community served by the school.

Leaders need to be clear that school improvement, increased student success in learning and school effectiveness are advanced by the very same strategies needed to make inclusion work. All the investment in people and programs used in traditional special education can be used to strengthen the capacity of the community school and make it inclusive.

All Children Ingredient

If there is one single ingredient that contributes to the success of the inclusion recipe, that ingredient is the students themselves – **all of them**. They constitute a diverse grouping in inclusive school classrooms. Such groupings provide the necessary stimulation for learning that children with special needs require as they engage in all the activities typical for children in their peer group. The cumulative effect of this stimulation is the single most powerful motivator available to schools. This stands in stark contrast to the reality of segregated special education that can in fact limit and inhibit the expectation for students who find their way to these classes. An inclusive school classroom has the potential to draw on all the energy, the creativity and the possibilities inherent in a group of several dozen students spending five or six hours together every school day. It is a resource both parents and teachers need to

⁶ Making Canadian Schools Inclusive, A Call to Action, (2008), Porter, G.L., Education Canada, The Canadian Education Association.



recognize and put to effective use in their community.

There is an element to this ingredient that is an obstacle that many teachers and parents have to overcome. That obstacle is the inclination to think that students only learn what “teachers” directly teach them. Make no mistake about it, teachers are important to student learning and skilled teachers will enhance student learning. However, the positive dynamic provided by a cohort of student peers is both motivating and empowering for children who might otherwise be excluded. Utilizing this potent ingredient in our schools and classrooms can increase positive outcomes and success. Inclusive education programs can both provide support for teachers and benefit their students.

Final Thoughts

My three-decade engagement in the effort to make schools and classrooms inclusive has been professionally engaging and informative. There are many complex factors involved in efforts to make inclusion both systemic and sustainable. However, we are fortunate that we are now at a point where we have extensive research and experiential knowledge about the policies, concepts, practices and skills that make it work.

The three ingredients discussed in this short paper are perspectives drawn from my research and experience. In summary the three key ingredients are:

- *Parents and Teachers* – They work as partners in mutual support of inclusion
- *School Improvement* – Educational leaders understand that to strengthen inclusion in classrooms is to strengthen schools
- *All Children* – Parents and teachers recognize and respect the powerful effect that children get from spending hours each school day in a classroom with the other children in the community school

Taken together these three key ingredients make for a recipe that can be widely shared and disseminated. It is time for us to accept the challenge of letting the world know the positive results that inclusive schools have for all children.

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For more information

Website of Inclusive Education Canada – www.inclusiveeducation.ca/