

Inclusion: The Gap Between Theory and Practice

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The Government of British Columbia aims “to provide inclusive and responsive learning environments that recognize the value of diversity and provide equity of access, opportunity and outcome for all students including students with disabilities and diverse abilities” (Ministry of Education and Childcare, 2023). Their website has articles, policies, definitions, and links to videos on what inclusive practice looks like and funding is provided to make this happen. Educational assistants, Learning Support Teachers, Youth Care Workers, Counsellors, Indigenous Support Workers, and Itinerant staff (specialized teachers) are some of the trained people who make up teams that support our most diverse students. Additional funding is put in place for resources such as lunches, ensuring all children have access to school supplies, field trips, and any other school fees that might be hard for families to pay. In theory, this sounds like a fool-proof plan, but in practice it isn’t as easy as it sounds. The intention to support all students is apparent, *some* funding is put in place, and yet there are still many challenges in supporting all students in class.

### **In Theory**

With the support of a team of school professionals paired with other supports, inclusion has many benefits. These include (but are not limited to) developing individual strengths and goals in class with peers of the same age, creating a sense of belonging by giving peers the opportunity to understand differences and develop friendships, and to appreciate diversity in the community outside of school and in the future (*What Is Inclusive Education? - Inclusive Education - Inclusion BC*, 2018). Inclusion is meant to set all students up for success in school, giving them the support, resources, adaptations, space, and relationships necessary for a positive learning environment. Ideally, all students with diversities would have access to supports at all

times, and the teachers and their team would meet regularly to communicate about what is working and what is not to ensure that each child is supported appropriately.

### **Funding**

Students with the most diverse needs are put into 3 categories (level 1, 2, 3) which rate the need of the child and then allocates the appropriate amount of funding to each district based on child and category. Level 1 students generate the most funding, as they are either physically dependent or Deafblind, level 2 is in the middle and pertains to autism, hearing or vision differences, profound intellectual disabilities, or chronic health, and level 3 gets the least funding for intensive behaviour (*Research: BC's Inclusive Education Funding Gap, 2019*). “Currently, districts receive no additional funding from the Ministry for students with mild intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, moderate behaviour issues, moderate mental illness or for those who are gifted” (*Research: BC's Inclusive Education Funding Gap, 2019*). So, how does this funding difference affect inclusion in the classroom? How are these students being supported? “The complexity of student needs has increased at the same time as supports to meaningfully address these needs have decreased” (*Research: The Landscape of Inclusion: How Teachers in British Columbia Navigate Inclusive Education Policy and Practice, 2020*).

### **Practice**

From my own experience, I can speak to the inclusion that I have seen and continue to see. My first experience was with a young girl who had Deafblindness and cerebral palsy, among many other chronic health concerns. As she was a level 1, her funding was incredible. The support she received enabled her to have a rich classroom experience because of the extra training I was given to help her communicate, learn, and build relationships. I was also given

complete autonomy to take her out of class as needed for health and wellness, and to meet on a regular basis with physiotherapists, occupational therapists, itinerant teachers for the visually impaired and hard of hearing, nursing staff, and many others. She was a 1:1, which meant that I was there for her and any other children I worked with was for the benefit of building relationships for her. She was fully accepted, had friends, and was a valuable member of her school.

My current student has non-verbal autism. He is at level 2, and although I work 1:1 with him, he does have a significantly smaller team and less resources available. This year we have a 'calm room' for students to go to when the classroom gets too busy. While I have done my best to include him in activities in the class, the Terry Fox Run, and Cross Country, and he is well liked by his peers and is a valued member of his school community, there isn't a lot of discussion between classroom teachers and myself regarding adaptations and modifications. There just isn't enough time due to other students in the classroom who need support.

### **Challenges**

Students such as the ones mentioned above have had full-time EA's and resources to ensure their success in school, but what about the students who need support and do not have the funding to make that happen? Here, from my observations, is where inclusion becomes exclusive. I see teachers trying to promote inclusive practice and are being pulled in many directions trying to support all students in their classrooms. Some students are learning and behaving at levels significantly lower than their peers, yet because there aren't enough EAs to go around, they might have one EA to share between multiple students in multiple classrooms. Recently, a colleague of mine, who is an EA told me "I feel bad because I don't have enough time to get to all my students with M.I.D.'s" (Congo, 2023). Another colleague, who is in

administration, vented that some teachers were feeling stretched thin with the number of behaviours in their classes and have come to him asking why they don't have EA support for these students (Frew, 2023). I have heard these concerns echoed from many educators throughout my career. There aren't enough support staff to go around for all the students who need support, because the students with the highest needs (and rightfully so) are the ones who have the most access to government funded support.

The students who fall outside of the funding categories are often seen leaving class and wandering the hallways, getting in fights, disrupting class, or struggling in class and shutting down, not wanting to be there. Simply put, from my research, observations and conversations, there aren't enough adults and spaces to support our "at-risk" students. Teachers are 'putting out fires', carrying the load of many on their shoulders, and do not have the time and resources available to collaborate with their team (*Research: The Landscape of Inclusion: How Teachers in British Columbia Navigate Inclusive Education Policy and Practice*, 2020). Our most diverse learners are getting the inclusive education that we speak to, but when inclusive education only funds some and not others, it is not equitable. "Inclusion describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs" (*Inclusive Education | Learning Support Services*, n.d.).

### **The Path to Inclusion Stretches Both Ways**

#### **Looking Back**

The path to inclusion has been long, beginning in the 1950's when children with differences could not attend school yet parents knew their children had more potential, and fought for their education. They began with private education in church basements, houses, and

other facilities, eventually moving into segregated government funded facilities as their advocacy began to receive support. Over the years, inclusive education grew into what it is today, from resource rooms, to integration, and finally, with the term and the concept of inclusion in general education classes in BC beginning in the 1980's (*What Is Inclusive Education? - Inclusive Education - Inclusion BC*, 2018). I have faith that we can continue to do better. I do not think we should give up on continuing to fight for inclusive education for all. The path to inclusion does not have a dead end.

### **Moving Forward**

There are many ways that we can work to increase support in our schools for those children who fall through the cracks without taking away from the ones who already have it. Some of these could be advocacy from schools and families, more education pertaining to adaptation and modifications, and voting for a government that promises more funding for our education system. I think we have a dilemma between the theory and practice of inclusion. To support students with all needs, advocacy for adequate support, including more staff, training, spaces, and resources is needed. Equitable funding is necessary to ensure that all students are getting “access [to] the high-quality education they deserve” (*Equity*, 2001). Talking about it amongst each other will not make change, we need to make change ourselves by advocating and voting every chance we get for ultimate student success, as those before us have.

### **Conclusion**

I chose this concept because of the many years that I have spent in special education witnessing ‘inclusive practice’ and having many questions pertaining to why some students have support and others don’t. I have spent years thinking that it was because teachers and administrators were allowing some students to fall through the cracks because they didn’t know

how to support them. Over the years, through many discussions with colleagues and through this research, I am humbled to say that it's not always because staff don't know how to support these students, it's because they do not have adequate resources, time, or funding.

Inclusion looks good for students who have full-time EA's and support due to adequate funding. They typically have alternative spaces when the classroom gets overstimulating, can take breaks, have modified and adapted programs and assignments, and get multiple supports from district helping teachers and other itinerant staff. They also are (most of the time) accepted and treated kindly by peers and teachers and benefit from an inclusive practice. Inclusion is a great concept. My research has shown that inclusion benefits the students who are fully funded and supported but I am disheartened when I see the number of students who aren't receiving support falling through the cracks. Inclusion needs to extend out to children who fall outside of the funding categories as well, otherwise we are perpetuating a multi-generational cycle of success for some and not others, which is exclusion. So, while I believe in inclusion, and see it happening in our schools, the inclusion that we say we practice, isn't equitable for all. The gap between the theory and practice of inclusion needs a bigger bridge between equity and inclusion, and that bridge is advocacy, education, and funding. Only then will inclusion benefit and reach all students.

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