



Implementing Inclusion in BC's Public Schools

Report on the June 14, 2017 Inclusive Education Summit



Introduction

On June 14, 2017, some 80 BC educators, parents and other education professionals gathered in Richmond, BC for our [Inclusive Education Summit](#), a full-day dialogue on how to restore quality inclusive education in British Columbia's public schools.

The June Summit featured leading Canadian voices on inclusive education, who built on a discussion launched at our March 2017 [Inclusive Education Forum](#). It also honoured four exemplary BC teachers for their contribution to advancing inclusion in BC's public schools (Read more [here](#) and [here](#)).

These activities are part of an ongoing initiative led by Inclusion BC in response to the landmark 2016 Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) ruling restoring contract ratios for BC's public school teachers. The June Summit also followed a provincial election that demonstrated a new political consensus on the need to invest in restoring supports for K-12 education, following the bruising 16-year legal battle between the BC government and its teachers.

"These are unprecedented times," noted Richmond's Director of Instruction, Richard Steward. In opening remarks at the June 14 Summit, he noted both opportunities and challenges facing school districts scrambling to respond to the SCC decision in time for the 2017-18 school year.

"An opportune moment and key juncture for BC," added BC Teachers Federation researcher [Sherri Brown](#), while also warning that many of the ingredients for restoring inclusion were still missing.

Notwithstanding the serious ongoing challenges, Summit participants also reflected a new sense of optimism. As teacher/inclusion consultant [Shelley Moore](#) summed it up,

"We have a unique opportunity now with a merging of stakeholders who are all on the same page and a new curriculum that supports teaching to diversity."

This report captures key themes from the June 14 Inclusive Education Summit, providing another step forward in our efforts to strengthen inclusive education in BC's public schools.

Meaningful transformation will not happen easily or overnight, but we are on a path that offers real promise for building a better public education system for all students in British Columbia.

Looking ahead, we will focus on the advice we heard from participants, who were clear about their desire for more supports to help teachers implement inclusive practices, including professional development, coaching, teacher-friendly resources and more time for collaboration. Some teachers travelled from outside of the Lower Mainland to attend our learning event, but funding and opportunities for such learning are scarce, especially in rural communities, and teachers emphasized that one day is not enough. Other identified priorities included training for educational assistants and parents, the importance of building strong partnerships with parents and sharing of successful strategies.

Inclusion BC is committed to ensuring that BC has strong, publicly-funded schools, with educators and parents who are well-equipped to implement best practices in inclusive education and to work collaboratively to support quality learning for all students. We invite all who support our vision to join us as we plan the next phases of this work.

Karen Delong
Director, Community Development

What is inclusion?

Inclusion is not just about kids with disabilities. It's about the whole stream of student diversity, noted presenter [Jacqueline Specht](#), Director of the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education at Ontario's Western University. It means all students belong and are valued members of their classroom and neighbourhood school communities.

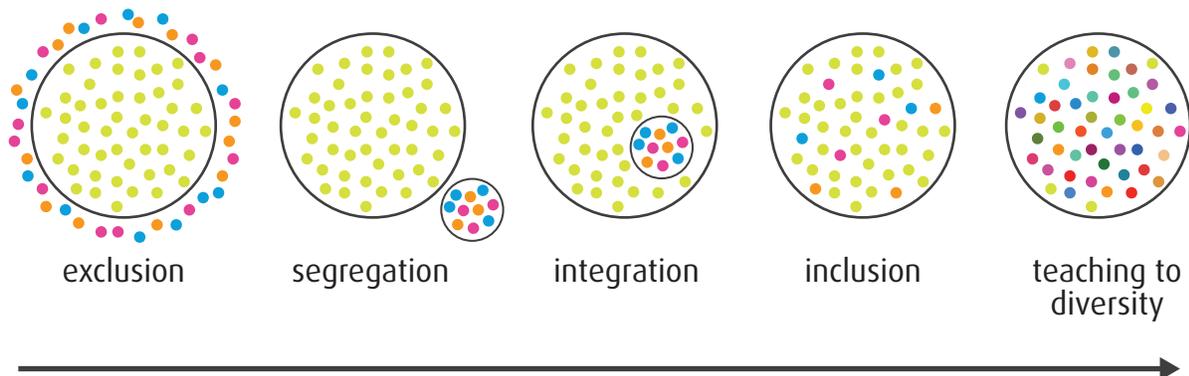
Exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion

To understand inclusion, the first step is to understand what it is not. A continuum of educational practice has moved us from exclusion to segregation for students with special needs, and in some cases to integration or inclusion. But integration — simply placing children in the same space together — isn't inclusion.

"Many parents say inclusion didn't work for my child," Moore said. "But they weren't talking about inclusion, they were talking about integration.

Old models for teaching students with special needs involved sending them to experts to be fixed and bringing them back when they met the definition of "typical" students (the green dots).

"The problem is no one is green," Moore added, citing the diagram below to explain the continuum that leads to inclusion and, ultimately, a model of teaching to diversity that recognizes and values each student's unique identity.



"It doesn't make sense to set a rule that we can only have three coloured dots in a class," Moore observed. "Setting a ratio like that is against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Do we value all the colours equally or are we trying to make everyone the same colour?"

Specht described what inclusive education looks like in practice:

- Students learn together.
- Support for students to learn better together and for teachers to teach students of all abilities.
- Membership in a regular class, not sitting in the back alone with an EA "glued to the hip."
- Going to your own natural neighbourhood school.
- Support to participate and contribute to the life of the school.

Why Inclusion?

We should not need to defend inclusion anymore, Steward remarked, given that every child in Canada has the right to an inclusive education (see [Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)).

An extensive body of research also confirms the benefits of inclusive education for ALL students.

And yet, as Specht discussed, research is showing slow progress and/or slippage away from inclusion across Canada, so she stressed that we do need to keep talking about the “why” of inclusion.

Benefits of Inclusion

Brown summarized the results of extensive research on the benefits of inclusive education:

- Peer effects (effects on peers and the wider community): The literature shows inclusion has a “pulling up” effect for all students. It helps all those who need support and doesn’t pull others down, contrary to assumptions by some parents who worry that students with special needs will divert teacher attention from their own child.
- Psychological and psychosocial effects: Typical children exposed to inclusive education have more empathy, maturity, leadership and pro-social behaviours. Effects on children with disabilities are less well understood.
- Socio-cultural & socio-political effects: Public schools that practice social inclusion and tolerance help to raise a generation with more positive attitudes and values, resulting in a more equitable democracy.
- Micro- & macroeconomic effects: Students are more likely to have jobs and access to microeconomic benefits in their own lives, with broader macroeconomic effects for the broader society.



How well are we doing?

Specht reviewed the Canadian literature on progress in implementing inclusion, noting the difficulty of making comparisons between provinces (See [Disability and Inclusion in Canadian Education](#)). A recent analysis showed how little progress Ontario had made, especially in secondary schools, despite 1998 legislation that mandated placement in regular classrooms as the first option for all students.

Brown presented additional research on BC's public school system, noting that provincial funding for public schools had declined steadily since 2002 relative to provincial GDP and total government spending. BC's public schools have lost thousands of classroom and specialist teachers, with growing waitlists for student assessments, increasing class size and complexity and privatization pressures. In this context, she added, parents who opt out of the public system are making a rational decision, given the growing provincial support for private education.

"If you build it, they will come," was how Specht described the pressures for private or specialized programs serving students with disabilities across Canada. "Creating special programs reinforces the message that regular teachers are not special enough to teach these kids and that they belong somewhere else."

We have to shift the mindset to an understanding that all kids can learn and that all teachers can teach all students, given the right supports,

Specht said. "Very few teachers don't believe in inclusion." More are concerned about how to do it and how to deal with the challenges of inclusion.

"It's hard for teachers to do, even when the school board believes in inclusion," she added.

Part of the challenge is a gap in translating research on the benefits of inclusive education into practice – the "How" of inclusion.

"We need to focus now on how to do inclusion," Steward said, adding that the new BC curriculum offers a valuable new opportunity to do this, with

a new way of teaching and pedagogy that supports teaching to diversity.

Brown and Specht agreed that the old curriculum, with the pressure of testing and paperwork demands, has been part of the problem. Teachers are also struggling with higher caseloads, less one-to-one time with students and longer waits for services like psycho-educational assessments, Brown noted. A recent BCTF study showed declining mental health for teachers and students, as teachers have been asked to do more with less.

The consequences for students have been severe. More and more students with special needs are being sent home from school due to a lack of support, as specialist teachers were given more classrooms to support and larger caseloads, with longer waits for assessments and scarce specialists like speech and language pathologists or occupational therapists.

Brown cited the example of a six-year "gradual entry" for one student because the district said it lacked the necessary staff and resources to support the student.

"It's not the sole factor but lack of resources is a significant driver and the result is that schools are denying some children their right to access public education," Brown said.

Few BC school districts track waitlists for specialist services, she added. Triage models to manage needs often leave "grey area" students falling further behind. Teachers don't even identify less urgent needs for service waitlists because there is no point.

In this context, Brown described the SCC decision as "a historic win," but not a "panacea."

It can help to address crowded and complex classrooms and provide more specialist teachers. But so far there is no new money for key needs, including in-service training, mentorship or professional development, classroom or specialist devices and supplies, educational assistants or psycho-educational assessment waitlist reductions (and those waitlists could actually grow as staff and resources are re-assigned).

Closing the gap: How to do inclusion

“We know why inclusion is important and we know how to teach students” Moore said. “So the question is how do we close the gap between these two gigantic silos? We need to focus on the practical aspects of reducing that gap. Even if it’s just a millimetre. The gap has been getting bigger for years and we’re now at a turning point where we’re either going to keep widening it or turn it around.”

“We can also spend all that new BC education money in a flash if we continue to teach 21st Century kids in 19th Century ways,” Moore warned.

The message is that new models of teaching to diversity are a far better investment for new education dollars than outdated and costly parallel systems.

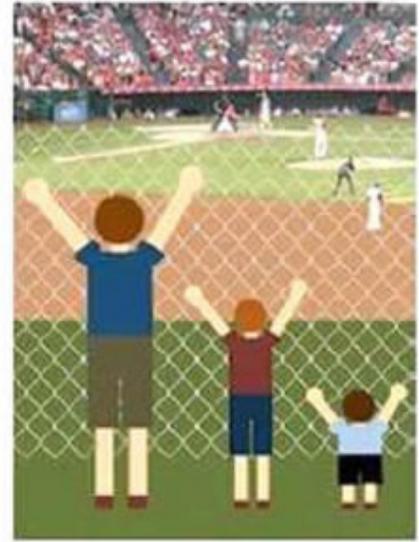
EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY



In the first image, it is assumed that everyone will benefit from the same supports. They are being treated equally.



In the second image, individuals are given different supports to make it possible for them to have equal access to the game. They are being treated equitably.



In the third image, all three can see the game without any supports or accommodations because the cause of the inequity was addressed. The systematic barrier has been removed.

Teaching to diversity: All means ALL

There are ways to bridge the gap, Moore noted. One is obvious, though in practice it's hard to do: "When we say all, we actually have to mean ALL. No exceptions!"

It's not about a plan for students with disabilities that's based on adapting a pre-existing plan for other students, Moore explained, but about starting out with a plan that's designed for ALL "This concept is our most under-utilized resource," she stressed. "We need to re-design our teaching to better meet the needs of all students so that you need to add less support after the fact."

Traditional integration models require extensive supports and resources for any student whose needs don't fit, because standard lessons and outcomes present a systemic barrier for any student who does not match the myth of the typical "green dot." Moore and others argue that BC's new curriculum removes this barrier, providing students with intellectual disabilities an entry point into the curriculum that

they've never had before. "It hurts nobody and benefits everyone," Moore explained.

"You start with strength!" Moore added. "Change the emphasis from what's missing to what assets each student brings and a model that focuses on growth, in which everyone advances."

"We need to re-think what is learning and what is growth," Specht agreed. "Everyone is capable of learning, so that's what we need to track. It's not about a certain standard bar that we set for everyone."



BC's new curriculum

The challenge of how to help teachers reconfigure their classrooms to teach to diversity has been a career focus for Leyton Schnellert, Assistant Professor in the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Education, who also spoke at the June 14 Summit. His research includes examining how teacher professional development relates to student diversity and inclusive education, and how to help teachers bridge theory and practice to achieve valued outcomes for all students.

Schnellert sees an exciting new opportunity in BC's new curriculum, with its focus on personalized learning, classroom flexibility, big ideas and teaching approaches that empower students to be well-rounded, critical thinkers and life-long learners.

If we just think about meeting one standard, he said, some students will always be left behind. "Instead, the new curriculum is about everyone moving ahead from where they are. The student needs to be moving, and the goals also need to be constantly moving. Higher achievement is not 'I got it!' It's 'What's next?'"

Moore agreed. Whereas the old curriculum limited teachers to one common, static goal for everyone, the new curriculum releases us to focus on moving everyone forward, she explained.

Under the new curriculum, every student has a chance to make a plan. "All really means all," Schnellert said. "Then you assess how it's going, decide on what's the next challenge and how to adjust to be more successful. It's about cycles of self-regulated activity."

Successful self-regulation in kindergarten predicts student achievement through Grade 6 — more so than IQ or knowledge of reading and math, he noted.

Empowering every child to self-regulate their learning is a key goal under the new BC curriculum and one that supports inclusion and teaching to diversity.

The new curriculum reflects a shift towards competency-driven curriculum. Competency isn't the destination; it's what drives each student's progress. And there is more focus on developing competence and deep learning over time than on how much content is covered.

"This creates an opportunity to build in more pathways for more learners. Benefits for inclusion include that every student can be engaged with the big idea, as all students are learning about the big idea together," he explained.

The Difference in teaching to diversity is that we don't start with our deficits; we start with our strengths, and this includes students, teachers, support staff, custodians, bus drivers, and parents."

- Shelley Moore





A less prescriptive curriculum allows flexibility and choice for teachers and students, enabling teachers to be creative and innovative in their design of learning experiences.

“If we create classes where all outcomes are expected to be perfect, many kids won’t get there and they are less likely to even try,” Schnellert noted. “Instead, we are encouraging risk takers. We all work on developing social skills or academics together from the level where we are at as individuals. Then you check in every week to discuss what did you get better at and the student sees himself getting better against his own standard, not ours.”

“As teachers we have moved from transmission (do what I do) to transformative (grow from what you are) by respecting diversity and what each student brings to the classroom,” Schnellert said.

Example

One Richmond class took the grade-level learning goal in a math 8 class and stretched it to accommodate a wider range of learners, including a student with Down Syndrome. The goal (about 3D prisms and surface area) was extended to create an access point for her (2D shapes). The part that made it inclusive, however, was that this access point was not just for her – other students who needed that support also had access. Many students benefited from taking the time to review how 2D shapes and 3D prisms are connected to each other.

RTI (Response to Intervention)

Moore also discussed using RTI as a planning framework to develop different support levels for a class, instead of trying to design 30 individual and differentiated programs.

“It’s a planning framework that allows students to move between support levels as needed,” she noted.

Best practice indicators

Specht presented and explained the 13 School-Wide Inclusive Education Best Practice Indicators, which were developed in the U.S. as a practical tool that any school can use to advance inclusion — regardless of where they are starting from.

The indicators provide a framework for conceptualizing inclusive, effective education for students of all abilities. Presented in a questionnaire format, they allow staff to evaluate their school’s practices, by indicating how much evidence they see of each aspect of the 13 indicators, and then to select targets for improvement.

This tool is specifically designed to work with schools at different stages of the journey towards more inclusive practice.

For example, Specht noted, many Ontario school boards feel overwhelmed because so many students are still in separate settings. But the idea is that you don’t have to do it all at once. You start where you’re at and set reasonable goals for improvement.

The indicators provide a useful way to start a group conversation about what’s happening in your school and how you can make changes, Specht concluded. The next step is to prioritize goals. Pick a manageable set of goals to focus on, then assess the results and set new targets as you make headway.



Four BC teachers were honoured on June 14th as recipients of the 2017 Inclusive Education Awards. (Left to right): Ray Yoo, Eve Minuk, Joyita Rubin and Monika Martinkova.

Key ingredients for success

While the potential offered by BC's new curriculum drove a significant portion of the day's discussion, speakers agreed on the importance on both leadership and advocacy to ensure that schools are restructured and resourced to support efforts to advance inclusion.

"We can't keep settling for this low bar," stressed Brown, who is also the parent of a student with special needs. "We have to stomp our feet and demand more. This is about our children's rights."

Recipients of the 2017 inclusive education awards also emphasized the importance of advocacy and of investing more resources to support teachers. They also acknowledged that having two BC winners from one school (Vancouver's Simon Fraser Elementary) and another two from one district (Richmond) was no accident, given the importance of leadership and culture in helping teachers overcome the very real barriers to inclusion.

"Much of this is tied to leadership, Specht added. "But if your school has a strong leader and that individual moves, the leadership could change tomorrow. So it's also important to build a strong community that includes teachers, parents and students, to ensure the work continues."

Summing up the day's take-home messages, participants highlighted the importance of investing to strengthen supports for teachers, including one-to-one coaches who help translate philosophy into practice and to implement inclusion in the classroom. ("As opposed to the ones who just do paperwork or that we send kids off to work with them," as one teacher noted). They also stressed the need for more focus on a model of professional development, more time for teachers to collaborate and more teacher-friendly resources.

There was broad agreement that this had to be a collaborative project in which every effort was made to bring all partners on board: experts, administrators, EAs, professional associations, ministries, parents and students. Building the necessary support will require that we do more to communicate the good stories about inclusion, not just the bad ones, to show people what can and is being done.



Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structures which exist in our societies; it is about transforming those systems and structures to make it better for everyone.

– Diane Richler, Past President, Inclusion International