

# Keys to successful inclusive education: A perspective from experience in the field

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusion of learners experiencing disabilities challenges traditional reliance on segregated education. With leadership from the United Nations and an increasing number of nations, inclusive education is obtaining global impact. As nations begin inclusive practice, it is becoming apparent that this new human rights and social justice approach to education and disability is characterized by a set of definable key elements. These “keys” are a blend of values, attitude systems, and educational practices. They range through desire to find and implement new ways to educate people experiencing disabilities, the emergence

of leadership, respect for all acts of learning, broader appreciation of individual achievement, understanding that all demonstrations of learning have value, realizing and accepting that regular class teachers know the basics required to teach diverse groups, the power and flexibility of universally accessible curricula, the value of collaboration among educators, parents, and others, and determination to persist with educational change despite resistance from conservative groups. The final key is the decision to begin and then to follow through with progressive change. A brief discussion of each key is presented.

(Pp. 91-101)

## KEY WORDS

Disability, inclusion, education, key strategies, social justice, change.

## Introduction

Education for learners experiencing disabilities is undergoing revolutionary change. The traditional special education model is being challenged by inclusive education. Inclusive education of all learners together in regular classrooms of community schools is replacing full-time and part-time placement in segregated settings. Social justice and the growing realization that inclusion benefits all learners drive this revolution, though social justice is the primary engine of change. Inclusive change is moving quickly in some nations, slowly in some others, and at a snail's pace in still others.

The majority of governments and educators have been slow to recognize the values of inclusive education pointed out by researchers such as Bunch and Finnegan (2000), Kenworthy and Whittaker (2000), Underwood (2004), and others. The United Nations and its associated bodies, however, leave no doubt regarding preference for inclusive education over special education. It is not that special education has not served a purpose. It has contributed strongly to admission of learners experiencing disabilities into education systems, albeit in settings segregated from their typical peers. Visionary leaders realize this contribution, but realize as well that the inclusive education approach is more socially just and more effective in both academic and social spheres. The segregation-based special education approach has served its purpose. UNESCO signaled need for socially just change in education in the Salamanca Statement of 1994.

“Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the exercise and enjoyment of human rights.

We believe and proclaim that ...regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, and achieving education for all”.

Olaf Sandkull (2005) of UNESCO, Bangkok writes of the underlying concepts of a rights-based approach to inclusive programming and core human rights obligations in education. He takes a broad view of education and rights as meaning education for all, with particular emphasis on the need for the inclusive education umbrella to cover both the dominant group and all those groups defined as “minority”. However, Sandkull notes that “*the perception of what human rights really means in practice is by and large not clear to most practitioners and especially planners and decision-makers in the Ministries of Education. In addition, there is not yet an explicit acceptance of using human rights as a framework in the policy and planning process*” (Sandkull, 2005: 2).

It is true that change takes time. Nevertheless, both those who welcome inclusive change and those who continue to support the special education approach know the basic educational concept of inclusive education. The Ministry of Education in the province of Ontario, Canada, for instance, in a recent resource manual distributed across the province (Education for All, 2005), states seven principles for educating learners experiencing disabilities. Few who advocate positive educational change in the area of disability would argue with the principles articulated.

- All students can succeed.
- Universal design and differentiated instruction are effective and inter-

connected means of meeting the learning productivity needs of any group of students.

- Successful instructional practices are founded on evidence-based research tempered by experience.
- Classroom teachers are the key educators for a student's literacy and numeracy development.
- Classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports students with special educational needs.
- Fairness is not sameness.

I chose the example of the Ontario Ministry of Education as one which understands the principles of inclusive education, not because the Ministry supports inclusion, but because it has decided to continue with the special education model "for practical reasons" (Special Education Transformation, 2006). Many governments and educators are caught up with the need to be "practical" at the expense of human rights and social justice for learners experiencing disabilities. These governments and educators find practical barriers to change daunting and unswayed by the acknowledged benefits which inclusive change would bring for all learners.

Despite the reluctance of Ontario and other jurisdictions to embrace the challenge of inclusion, a growing number of national, provincial, state, and local education systems are changing. There are many places one might visit to learn about how change to inclusive practice can be planned and implemented. Change may take time. Change may upset those with conservative views of education. Change may mean that teachers must approach education and disability somewhat differently. But there are lessons to be learned

from those who have seen the values of inclusion in education and have accepted the challenge of change.

The balance of this article departs from usual academic style based on review of research and policy in education. I have had opportunities to visit and learn about inclusive practice in many places. I have spoken with those who are attempting to move toward inclusion and with those who have moved, as well as with those resisting change. As I have traveled, I have met and worked with many exciting people. I have had the luxury of standing back and reflecting on what I have observed.

I have become aware that certain patterns or key to inclusion emerge where inclusion is being put into practice, and where it is not. These keys are of both conceptual and physical nature. The conceptual relate to the values and attitudinal systems people hold. However, values and attitudes will lead to decisions to introduce inclusion or to reject it and stay with the status quo. The physical relate to educational practices which will support or impede positive change. These practices are the tools teachers and administrators employ as they initiate inclusion in their classrooms and schools, or as they continue with the status quo.

## 1. A questing attitude

Where inclusion has taken hold in Canada and elsewhere, there was always someone who questioned why it was necessary to educate learners with disabilities in segregated settings. There was someone who questioned the effect of the special education model on learners, teachers, schools, families, and communities.

There was someone who asked why learners with disabilities could not be educated with their typical peers in community schools down the street.

Where such questions were asked and re-asked likelihood of change toward inclusive education was higher. Where such questions were not asked, likelihood of continued exclusion of students with disabilities was higher.

It has been true that, in Canada, a questioning attitude is more common among parents than among school administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and governments. Parents see the effects of segregation on their children much more clearly than do others, and they see the impact of inclusion. The perception of parents is a lesson for educators in itself. However, there are examples of members of these other groups beginning to question the special education model and coming together with parents. Thus, when educators and parents came together in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada in the late 1960s, an entire school system moved to inclusion. This was one of the first school systems anywhere, if not the first, to move to inclusion. Today, there is not one student in this system who does not attend the regular classrooms of her or his community school. This is true no matter what type or degree of disability is involved. However, this is not the case with the great majority of Ontario school systems. Though the leaders of these systems understand the arguments advanced for change to inclusion, they, led by the Ministry of Education, have opted to continue with the special education model.

Beyond Ontario in Canada, when educators, parents, and governments came together in the province of New Brunswick

and the northern territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, inclusive policies and practice resulted. In other instances, individual leaders, who have asked whether there was a better way to educate learners experiencing disabilities, have moved schools and classrooms across Canada to become islands of inclusion in a sea of special education settings.

My experience is that those parents, educators, people experiencing disability, and others impress the vision and value of inclusive change on governments and school system leaders, the likelihood of change increases. Where parents, educators, and others do not press for change, governments and school systems see no need to move from the status quo.

A questing attitude is the first key of inclusive change. It leads to some individuals stepping forward and leading others in change. Thus, personal and professional conviction that change will better the lives of all children is the central agent of change. As Mahatma Gandhi, a great leader, said:

*"We must be the change we wish to see".*

## 2. Leadership

Leaders lead in many directions. This is as true within the fold of education as it is in any other societal endeavour. The direction leadership takes may be positive. It may be neutral or it may be negative. Leadership toward inclusion of marginalized learners in education is universally viewed as positive, though some consider it as a utopian, impractical hope. This last group will never lead others to progressive change in education.

With regard to inclusive education, leaders have appeared across Canada, but not nearly everywhere. Where they do appear, a simple but powerful process occurs. When leaders share their ideas and convictions with others, more leaders arise. Leaders encourage leadership in others. Leaders expect leadership potential in others. Leaders see leadership in teachers, parents, other professionals, and in students. Leadership stimulates others to step forward and support that in which they believe.

In Canada and elsewhere, where leaders have made no bones about the values they see in inclusion, the expectations they have for teachers, and the admiration and trust they have for parents, inclusion has flourished. Where leaders have done their best to provide needed supports, schools and school systems have responded. Schools and school systems have responded even when concrete supports were scarce or unavailable, as long as personal leadership existed. Concrete supports are necessary, but not as necessary as personal support from colleagues, administrators, and others.

Inclusive leaders remain uncommon in Canada and elsewhere. Change does take time. It takes time for leaders to develop and begin to have an impact. This is true as much in education as in any other area. Despite this challenge, more and more future leaders are appearing in the ranks of young teachers, parents, other professionals, and students. The emergence of leadership by individuals has been apparent in every nation which I have visited. Inclusive thought and practice are slowly advancing. Change toward inclusive education is in the air and leaders for that change are emerging.

We need leaders to effect change. Leadership is both a personal issue and a professional necessity. Educators, parents, people with disabilities, advocates, and governments must be of the same mind if inclusive education for those experiencing disabilities is to take root and spread. Many in Canada learned this lesson, but many others will take more time to grasp the value of a human rights, social justice approach to education and disability.

As John Fitzgerald Kennedy declaimed:

“It is time for a new generation of leadership to cope with new problems and new opportunities. For there is a new world to be won”.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1960).  
*Speech accepting the Democratic  
Presidential nomination*

### 3. Respect

Inclusive education is a symbol of respect for all of humanity. Such respect is not a characteristic to be found to any strong degree in the history of our world. Our history is largely one where males have dominated women, where the stronger have conquered and demeaned the weaker, where the wealthy have subjugated the poor, and where dominant groups have killed, enslaved, and abused those seen as different.

In the history of education, those who have been seen as different have been denied right of access to schools. It is only recently that progress has been made in terms of access to education by women, by those of different races, and by those who are poor. In various nations where I have some experience, the progress being

made in these areas may be less than in Canada, but change in Canada is occurring. The hinge of change in access to education is respect for others despite difference. In no nation is there any group which has garnered less respect than that of people experiencing disability. Even in wealthy nations, such as Canada, this group of learners has been granted only grudging access to education. A strong sign of disrespect in education for learners experiencing disabilities is the continued dominance of the special education model. What respect is there while learners experiencing disabilities are not considered worthy of learning in the company of their able-bodied peers?

If it was evident that learners experiencing disability learned more effectively in segregated environments, there might be an argument for continuing the special education model. However, research over the last quarter century indicates that learners experiencing disability reach higher levels of academic and social achievement in inclusive settings than in segregated settings. A meta-analysis by Baker, Wang, and Walberg undertaken as far back as 1995 suggested this relationship. While not all studies have replicated the Baker, et al. finding for all categories of disability, the trend is that inclusive education is found to be more academically effective and definitely more socially effective than is special education. If higher achievement is not the base of special education, what is the base? Why is segregation of some learners still a fact in so many nations where there is little evidence of change to inclusion?

The Random House College Dictionary defines respect as “admiration for or a sense of worth or excellence of a person, a personal quality or trait, or something

considered as a manifestation of a personal quality or trait”.

Where inclusive education is successful in Canada a particular type of respect is present. This is respect for all people as learners, with specific reference to learning in the regular classrooms of the nation.

Where inclusive education is successful, the desire and attempt to learn is respected, not the place on the curriculum where learning occurs for any individual.

Where inclusive education is successful, all players are respected, whatever their roles and contributions.

Where inclusive education is successful, human rights, student rights, are respected.

Where inclusive education is successful in Canada or other nations, respect is a uniting element. Where one does not give respect and others do not perceive respect, human rights and social justice are more than elusive. Respect in education for all others is a cornerstone of democratic practice. This, too, is a lesson not yet learned by all.

“Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects”.

(Aristotle)

## 4. Achievement

Achievement means to accomplish something, to attain an objective. Schools around the world have warped this simple definition. They believe achievement in school equates with how much one

achieves in terms of mastering the curriculum at a certain rate. Learners are judged, not on whether their learning is meritorious on a personal and individual level, but against its amount in comparison with other learners. Emphasis on academic and social achievement is appropriate in education systems. There is no question what learning and achieving is what schools are all about. However, respect only for those learning the most is not a lesson that schools should teach in democratic societies.

The issue of merit in achievement differs in inclusive settings I have visited in Canada and other places. In fact, the way achievement is regarded by teachers and school administrators is almost a litmus test of whether inclusion is happening.

In inclusive settings all learners are supported to master as much of the curriculum as they can. However, it is recognized that learners will master the curriculum at different rates. It is the act of learning which is meritorious, the act of putting forth effort, the act of moving forward and learning more. Every act of achievement is celebrated. In fact, some learners experiencing disabilities put more effort into their learning than do many other learners who find learning to come easily. A key idea is that striving for personal achievement is worthy of recognition.

This view of achievement troubles those who believe that one learner is superior to another based on speed and amount of learning. The result of this belief is that many learners experiencing disability are separated from their peers and placed in segregated settings. It is as if a modest pace of learning is offensive. Inclusion values learning, supports every learner in achieving as much as possible, and un-

derstands that we all are different in our learning capacity. This is a key concept underlying inclusive education.

Those in inclusive settings in Canada and other places where inclusion is taking hold have realized that supporting everyone in their learning does not diminish the learning of anyone. In fact, more learning goes on, sometimes unexpectedly so, for all learners. As noted earlier, it is increasingly apparent that students experiencing disabilities learn more effectively in inclusive settings. It also appears that typical learners learn lessons which do not come from books, but which are every bit as important in life.

“Much learning does not teach understanding”.

(Heraclitus).

*On the Universe*

## 5. Learning is learning

Learning is at the heart of education. This is true to such a degree for some educators and some governments that they believe they have right of approval of what is acceptable as learning. They define who are considered learners by amount of curriculum mastered over a set period of time. They discount the learning of some students because they do not learn as rapidly as the majority of learners. Often these “not true learners” are relegated to the margins of education, or not admitted to education at all. This is the case with learners with disabilities in most school systems.

Where inclusive education in Canada or elsewhere is successful, all learners are accepted as true learners, true learners at their own levels of ability. Learning more

powerfully than most, as with students labeled gifted or talented is still learning, and worthy of applause. Learning more modestly than most, also, is still learning, and worthy of applause.

Where inclusive education is successful, an individual level of learning is respected. It is a quality within the learner and not to be dismissed. All learning has value. All learners have value. When leadership values all acts of learning, all learners are supported and encouraged to learn as best they can. Learning is learning. Not a race. Not a competition. Not a mark on a test. All learners have a right to laurel leaves.

This is a key lesson. The speech John Fitzgerald Kennedy never delivered in Dallas on November 22, 1963 contained this thought:

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other”.

## 6. Teaching is teaching

Traditional belief regarding learners with disabilities is that they require special teaching and special settings within which to be taught. For them, the special education view is that teaching in ordinary ways and being taught by ordinary teachers is not sufficient. The cornerstones of the special education model are special schools, special classes, special teachers, and special methods.

What I have found in Canada and elsewhere, where I have seen successful inclusion, is that teaching is teaching. Ordinary teachers know how to teach. They know the curriculum from which all learners should learn. They know how

to teach all learners, though the system has told that they do not. It is not the skill of teaching that is lacking. It is the confidence gained from knowing that what works for one student works for all students. This does not mean that ordinary teachers know everything about how to teach all learners. Teachers may need to alter the speed of teaching for some learners. They may need to vary the amount to be learned in a set period of time. They may need to provide more auditory or visual stimulation. They may need to involve parents, volunteers or other students. But they do have the basic knowledge of how to teach. This is the knowledge needed for inclusive education. Support from specialist teachers may be needed for some learners. Inclusion does not mean leaving classroom teachers on their own. It means a collaborative orchestration of supportive resources, both personnel and material. It does mean that learners are more like other learners than they are different. It means that most of the ordinary techniques of teaching will work.

An important lesson I have learned is that the regular classroom teacher can accept responsibility for all students. Working collaboratively with others supports the teacher in doing this successfully. Among those with whom ordinary teachers need to collaborate are specially prepared teachers. At times their support and specialized knowledge is invaluable. Nevertheless, it is the ordinary teacher, teaching inclusively in an ordinary classroom from universally accessible curricula, who is most successful. Teachers do know how to teach.

“A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops”.

Henry Brooke Adams.  
*The Education of Henry Adams*



## 7. Universal access to curriculum

Nations have embraced, as never before, the notion that the curriculum must be sacrosanct. Content must be set, learning expectations laid down, and teachers required to ensure that all students meet these expectations. Those students who failed to meet the expectations could expect to have their presence in a regular classroom reconsidered. In places such as Ontario and England, schools which do not score well on required province-wide tests are considered poor schools and the teachers to be at fault, regardless of differences, such as socio-economic status or number of students whose first language is not English, among schools

In my own province of Ontario, this universal testing requirement was supported by development of a four level assessment rubric which classified learners as level, 1, 2, 3, or 4. This rubric was to be applied to all work produced by all students. The rubric, in effect, is a labeling system which sorts learners into levels from mastery to minimal competency. All learners, no matter what their personal learning abilities, were exposed to the same content in basically the same manner. If some learners did not succeed, that was their fault. A special class placement was always available for them. This one-size-fits-all curriculum-centred approach to learning has proven an excellent support for the special education model.

Where inclusion has succeeded in Canada and elsewhere, the curriculum is regarded as a tool, not as a controlling agent. It is viewed as flexible. It is to be attuned to an individual pace of learning. The guideline is that students in the same classroom

can learn together, though they may be at differing parts of the curriculum. In other words, when inclusion is the objective, curricula are designed for universal access for all learners. Within the individual view of learning, need to achieve the highest level of personal achievement is not dismissed. Indeed, individualized learning is viewed as a way to bring out the best efforts in all learners. Educators across the world are aware of the concepts of Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction. In school systems continuing the special education approach, it seems that the term "Universal" is misunderstood as meaning "for almost all learners". Those who value inclusion of all learners are turning their efforts to designing curricula and instruction based on these concepts for all learners. We know how to do it. The question is whether we will do it.

"To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of all the human person".

Preamble

*Charter of the United Nations.*

## 8. Collaboration

A foundation stone of inclusive practice is on collaboration among all players in education: teachers, specialist teachers, parents, supporting disciplines, and even the students. The view is that education and learning will proceed more powerfully if all involved understand what is happening, and if they all have a part to play.

In Canada, collaboration traditionally has been more of a theoretical concept when it comes to schools. Teachers have been accustomed to running their own classrooms with little interference or advi-

ce from others. Parents, to a large degree, have been seen as interlopers in schools. They have not been welcomed, even though schools may give the opposite impression in public discussion. Support from other disciplines was to be delivered outside of school hours or in special education settings, not in the regular classroom. Specialist teachers preferred to work with individual students or small segregated groups outside the regular classroom. Students were to be seen, but not heard. They were not valued as part of the support system available to learners having special needs. This separation of player from player has been lessening in school systems supporting the special education model over recent years, but not in any significant degree. A collaborative attitude is not yet common amongst Canadian educators, though rhetoric abounds.

The only area where collaboration among educators, parents, other disciplines, and students in support of all learners has come to flower in Canada is where inclusion is being practiced. Inclusive classrooms often have one or more other adults working with the teachers. Students are often a valuable part of the support system for learners experiencing disabilities. Do not mistake me. Collaboration is not perfect in inclusive schools. Students, in particular, often are left out of the mix. Some players must learn new skills when it comes to collaboration. But collaboration has proven key to successful inclusion in Canada and elsewhere.

Where the lesson of British poet John Donne that *“No man is an island, entire to itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main”* has been learned in Canada, collaboration has been part of the process, and the roots of inclusion have taken firmer hold.

## 9. Determination

Determination is a quality not unique to Canada, or to inclusive practice. However, where I have seen success in inclusive education in Canada, I have witnessed determination.

- I have seen teachers and others determined to find ways to teach every learner.
- I have seen teachers determined to make collaboration work to the benefit of a learner.
- I have seen parents determined to actively support those teaching their child, and to accept responsibility for stimulation at home.
- I have seen classroom volunteers determined to help as much as they could.
- I have seen administrators determined to create school environments conducive to learning by all.
- I have seen people with disabilities determined to learn.

Where I have seen these things, I have seen inclusive teaching, and I have seen happier, more confident teachers and students. Teachers, administrators, parents, and others must be determined to improve the learning of all students.

*“Dissatisfaction with the world in which we live and determination to realize one that shall be better, are the prevailing characteristics of the modern spirit”.*

Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson.  
*The Greek View of Life*

## 10. Get started

Now we come to my final and most important key, simply getting started. All the other keys to learning mean little until intent is translated into action.

I have heard people talk about the values and challenges of inclusion on many occasions and in many places. I have heard administrators discuss why inclusion, though having undisputed value, could not happen in their particular environments. I have heard many professionals explain why a certain child or youth, who would benefit from being included, certainly could not be included due to this, or that, compelling reason. I have heard inclusion described as a wonderful philosophy, but too utopian to be possible. There are many who resist inclusion in these ways.

Where I have seen inclusion succeed in Canada, I have seen educators, parents, and others put aside reservations and simply get started. Without getting started and finding out what can happen, no key element I have mentioned is worth anything. The keys obtain their value by someone deciding to get started and then doing so. Individual teachers can begin inclusion in their classrooms. They can lead. They do not need to wait for others.

These qualities are basic to inclusive education where I have seen it in Canada and other nations. They do not cost anything. They exist to some degree in all people. They are universal keys to success where inclusive education is the issue. They are not Canadian, or Indian, or Scots, or Spanish, or Brazilian. They repose, waiting to be awakened in the interest of education and social justice, in everyone.

“A journey of a thousand miles must begin with one step”.

Lao-tzu. *The Way of Lao-tzu*

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