Inching Toward Inclusion: The Excellence/Equity Dilemma in our Schools

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Abstract

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Since the early part of this century special needs programming has been traditionally provided in separate, special education programs, classrooms and settings. For the majority of the provinces and territories special education services in the schools have mushroomed since the 1960s and 1970s. The increase has been primarily in the area of mild handicap and gifted education, areas that were formerly the responsibility of regular classroom teachers. Consequently, special education became a dominant second system within our schools that is characterized by features such as categorization, specialized testing and assessment, special programming and class placement, specially trained teachers, separate funding, and specialized teaching methods and curriculum (Lupart, 1992a). Paradoxically, this trend is in direct contradiction to prevailing societal views favoring inclusion.

The problem, it would appear, is not one of lack of information about what can be appropriately and successfully used in the teaching and instructional programming for students with exceptional learning needs. This expertise has been very well developed over the past 30 years in special education research and teaching. Rather it stems from an incompatibility between the philosophy of inclusive education and policies and practices that continue to reinforce out-dated assumptions about student disability. Education advocates of inclusion have come to the realization that the onus for change has to shift from the individual student fitting into school programs offered, to the schools making the necessary changes to ensure the learning success of a growing diversity of students in our communities.

Efforts to this end are already taking place across Canada, however, these typically have been initiated by special educators and advocates of students with special needs. Though top-down initiatives such as provincial/territorial legislation and policy have been effective for setting the direction and for establishing a framework for educational change it is ultimately regular classroom teachers who are the front-line professionals who will have the major responsibility for making inclusive education work (Lupart & Webber, 1996). Clearly, a coordinated, pan-Canadian level analysis and synthesis of best practices, legislation, policy and outcomes is a necessary starting point. This paper attempts to define some of the major gaps in our educational systems and knowledge bases and what might hold the greatest promise for authentic "special needs programming."

Introduction

In a recent analysis of current educational trends, Keating (1996) noted that successful school change or transformation in the next century depends on the creation of a “learning society” in Canada. To achieve this goal he outlines the critical importance of providing school programming options and opportunities that will foster the full development of learning potential in all students in Canada’s schools. This means that all students, even those with exceptional learning needs, require personally challenging, individually appropriate educational programming that ensures the continuous progress of each and every student.

Though we might find a significantly high level of agreement for the goal outlined by Keating (1996), the ways and means of achieving this would vary considerably from school to school, district to district, and province/territory to province/territory. Indeed, school transformation efforts have been set forth in school districts across the country over the past twenty years, and indications such as student dropout rates, the rise in students identified as special needs and at-risk, provincial, pan-Canadian, and international achievement comparison studies, and young adult employment statistics suggest that our schools haven’t incorporated the changes and adaptations to keep up with the explosive growth of new information and communication technologies (Council of Ministers, 1998). Moreover, futurists have emphasized the importance of education as we move into a new information age, and warned that we can no longer be complacent about missed opportunities for full development of student potential and fragmented piece-meal approaches to problems that require significant, systemic transformation. The concern is particularly salient when we consider students who have exceptional learning needs and who are deemed to require special needs programming.

The Multiple Meanings of Special Needs Programming

There have been several recent publications in Canada that attempt to represent the current situation concerning the provision of an appropriate education for students with exceptional

learning needs (Andrews, 1996a; 1996b; Andrews & Lupart, 1993; Bunch & Valeo, 1997; Crawford & Porter, 1992; Crealock & Bachor, 1995; Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Lupart, McKeough, & Yewchuk, 1996; Porter & Richler, 1991; Weber, 1994; Winzer, 1996; 1997). The term "special needs programming" captures the essence of what most contemporary educators would agree is the primary goal most schools in Canada are striving to accomplish. However, the meaning of "special needs programming" has been radically altered over the course of this century, and as school transformation efforts in regular and special education begin to merge and overlap, continued alteration and evolution of the notion of "special needs programming" is assured.

One of the most significant changes associated with "special needs programming" has been focused on the "who" element. Early efforts were associated with accurate diagnosis, classification and labeling of students who were considered to be unable to benefit from regular classroom instruction. Terms such as atypical, disabled, handicapped, special needs, challenged, and exceptional have been advanced to help educators to understand and communicate about the diversity of students that require something different than regular educational programming. Over time the number of categories of students and the number of students deemed to require "special needs programming" has increased from those students with visible handicaps such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, or mental disability to needs less detectable such as students with learning disabilities, students with speech and language disabilities, and even students who are gifted and talented. For example, Alberta Education statistics (Alberta Education, 1989; 1992; Church, 1980) show that there were three categories and 256 identified students in 1950, whereas in four decades these numbers increased to 20 categories and 51,711 identified students with exceptional learning needs in 1992. The CMEC *Special Education Information Sharing Project* (1989) reveals a similar escalation of definitions and special needs student categories across the country.

Another significant change associated with the term "special needs programming" is captured

by the “what” and “where” elements. Prior to mid-century “special needs programming” typically meant separate, isolated service in residential schools and institutions. Services ranged from basic custodial care to special educational training, and school age children were often sent away from their homes and communities to wherever the special service was being provided. As the schools began to assume more responsibility for students with diverse learning needs over the past 40 or 50 years, the term “special education” became the one most widely adopted to characterize “special needs programming”, and is, perhaps, still the best known in the educational community. Winzer (1996) defines special education as: “instruction that is specifically designed to meet the unique needs of children and youth who are exceptional” (p. 5). For many schools and school districts the “what” associated with the special education approach is depicted as a five-box, one-way process of referral, testing, labeling, placement, and programming (Andrews & Lupart, 1993). Special education has been widely characterized by features such as categorization, specialized testing and assessment, special classroom placement and special programming, specially trained teachers, separate funding and specialized teaching methods and curriculum (Lupart, 1992a). The “where” factor associated with “special needs programming” has gradually shifted from separate full-time special class and school placement to a continuum of services with most students deemed to require “special needs programming” receiving assistance with specified support in regular classroom settings or a combination of part-time special education and regular classroom placement, to the more recent emphasis on inclusion. Legislation and parent and professional advocacy have been important levers in the widespread expansion of traditional “special needs programming” (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Winzer, 1996) and within the confines of traditional special education came the development of new and innovative educational practices and the creation of an extensive new knowledge base. Indeed, beginning mid-century, special education quickly became established as a second system within the general education system, and for the most part, the separation of special education and regular education responsibility was generally accepted by all concerned.

However, since the 1970s, two factors have been significant in disrupting the comfortable symbiosis of regular and special education systems of education in schools in Canada, and most importantly the “who” “what” and “where” elements of traditional “special needs programming.” First, came the realization that labels and categories associated with “special needs programming” have increased dramatically over the past fifty years. Accordingly, so have the numbers of students deemed to require “special needs programming.” Current estimates of all school-age children in Canada with a disability come out at approximately 15.5 per cent of the total population of students in this age-range (Winzer, 1996) and of these, approximately 25 per cent are educated in separate settings and the remaining 75 per cent are educated within the general education system (Winzer, 1997). Students with low-incidence exceptionalities comprise about 10 to 15 percent of all students with disabilities, and include children with moderate, severe, and multiple disabilities, students with sensory impairments, and students with physical and health disabilities, and autism (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998). The incidence and prevalence figures for these students have not increased significantly over the past fifty years.

Students with high-incidence exceptionalities include those who are gifted, or who have learning disabilities, speech and/or language disabilities, emotional disturbances, mild cognitive disabilities, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998). In contrast to students with low-incidence exceptionalities, the numbers of students with high incidence exceptionalities has mushroomed in the past fifty years. The increase has been primarily in the area of mild handicap and disability, and gifted education, areas that were formerly the responsibility of regular classroom teachers. Moreover, in recent years, there has been a substantial growth in the number of students considered to be at-risk for failure to achieve their full potential in school (Crawford & Porter, 1992; Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998) and ultimately in society (Fawcett, 1996; Galaway & Hudson, 1996). Most alarmingly, this population of “at-risk” students is rapidly exceeding the traditional boundaries of special education to include students from economically, culturally, or language-disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as those

with chronic low achievement (Lupart, 1992a; Neufeld & Stevens, 1992). Paradoxically, these trends are in direct contradiction to the prevailing societal, and for the most part, educationally accepted ideological stance of inclusion.

The second significant factor inducing school change came with a growing societal interest in the limitations and restrictions experienced by those individuals identified and removed from Canada's mainstream. Challenged initially by concepts such as normalization, integration, and mainstreaming, schools in Canada have, albeit haltingly, come to accept inclusion as the preferred educational goal for all students. Hutchinson (1996) describes the movement toward inclusion in Canada as set in the context of society and competing social values. Thus, the educational struggle is centered on "examining the below-the-surface conflicts inherent in the professional organization of schools within a society that has committed itself to inclusion among a variety of competing values" (p.8-9). In support of this position, Lusthaus & Lusthaus (1992) assert that a relatively positive and productive view of persons with disabilities in Canada has resulted in a greater acknowledgment of human rights, increased social acceptance, and integration into home communities. Crawford and Porter (1992) outline several areas of positive reform "including employment-related policies and practices, and educational. social service, transportation, rehabilitation, health and income support systems" (p.1).

The biggest hurdle for the educational system in attempting to overcome these two post-70s trends of increased numbers of at-risk students and the move toward inclusion has been the reconciliation of separate regular and special education ideology and practice (Bunch & Valeo, 1997; Lupart, McKeough, & Yewchuk, 1996). Though early concepts such as integration and mainstreaming were intended to support the move toward progressive inclusion (Bunch & Valeo, 1997; Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Lupart, McKeough & Yewchuk, 1996), the invisible obstacle was the continuing assumption that "the problem" for anyone identified as having special needs is situated within the child, and the educational focus was to fix or eliminate the difference through special needs programming. Skrtic (1991), for example, asserts that the

following assumptions underlie traditional special education approaches: "(1) Disabilities are pathological conditions that students have. (2) Differential diagnosis is objective and useful. (3) Special education is a rationally conceived and coordinated system of services that benefits diagnosed students. (4) Progress results from incremental technological improvements in diagnosis and instructional interventions. " (p. 54).

Unfortunately these faulty assumptions remain operative in most school jurisdictions, and continue to confuse educators and mask the real purposes of educational initiatives such as special needs student coding and labeling, the retention of a continuum of special educational services; initiatives that are inappropriately put forward as supportive of inclusion. Simply naming a change initiative inclusion doesn't mean that is inclusion. Bunch and Valeo (1997) make a key point in noting that the reinforcement of traditional assumptions of disability, perpetuates the notion that any students designated as requiring "special needs programming" whether or not they attend full or part time regular education classrooms, makes them visitors to the regular classroom. For many students, primarily those with lesser disability or need, they are "visitors always and visitors on condition of acceptable progress and sufficient resources, both as defined by the teacher" (p. 3).

As Hahn (1989) describes it, the above traditional perspective of disability is captured by the notion of "functional limitations" with an associated educational emphasis on student deficit, charity-like compensation, fixing the problem, and exclusion. By contrast, he describes contemporary notions of disability as "minority rights", which center on removal of barriers in the educational environment, the acquisition of basic human rights, and inclusion.

Others within the educational community are beginning to raise similar concerns and issues (Birkenbach, 1993; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Heshusius, 1986; Skrtic, 1991; 1996; Slee, 1997) and many current reform leaders are suggesting a movement toward the "deconstruction" of disability (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Skrtic, 1991; 1996). Essentially, they argue that there are many forms of social injustice within the school that are based on "inconsistencies, contradictions, and silences in the conventional outlook" (Skrtic, 1996, p. 50) such as the hierarchy of ability and

disability, and a failure to articulate “a logical and consistent philosophy that supports the nonexclusionary education of all students” (Danforth & Rhodes, p. 357).

For educational advocates of inclusion, the recent emphasis has been away from the traditional “special education” issues of “who”, “what” and “where” toward a “deconstruction” of disability and ability as an either/or condition (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Skrtic, 1991; 1996) and the elimination of barriers within the school context that make it difficult for many students to achieve their full learning potential. There is still a long way to go and time will be needed to change ideology, philosophy, theory, and particularly school and classroom practices of inclusion. Though the development of the special education system has been a necessary part of the evolution of inclusive education in Canada (Bunch & Valeo; 1997; Keating, 1996), innovations that bring together the abilities and talents of a diverse student and educator population are required. Traditional “special needs programming” practices such as referral, diagnosis, labeling, and placement decisions should not occupy much time and space in an inclusive educational system. Perhaps we even need to question the term “special needs programming” since its multiple meanings may be too intricately associated with traditional special education as opposed to inclusive education.

School Organization, School Change and the New Meaning of Special Needs Programming

In the same way that schools have been stymied by inappropriate and outdated views of persons with exceptional learning needs, the school structures and school support systems of most schools in Canada are hopelessly ill equipped to achieve the educational goal of fostering continuous progress and appropriate educational services for all students. The National Commission on the Future of Teaching in America (1996) concluded that: “Todays schools are organized in ways that support neither student nor teacher learning well. Like the turn-of-the-century industries they were modeled after - most of which are now redesigning themselves - current structures were designed to mimic factories that used semi-skilled workers to do discrete pieces of work in a mass production assembly line” (p. 45). Though many educators

and scholars in Canada have come to recognize this issue as a major stumbling block to positive educational change, efforts to set a different course and structure have not been particularly successful (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Lupart, in press; Lupart, McKeough, & Yewchuk, 1996).

Major obstacles to school reform and their perceived lack of effect, can be traced to several factors. First, is the undue separation of regular and special education, and the differing agendas each has had in school change efforts. In a recent analysis of school change initiatives in Canada over the century, Lupart & Webber (1996) concluded that school change efforts and focus have been clearly divided along regular education and special education system lines. The interest of special educators has been to foster inclusion, and their efforts have been instrumental in changing educator attitudes toward student exceptionality, and promoting “special needs programming” options that are increasingly carried out in regular education classrooms. Indeed, a recent pan-Canadian study on resistance and acceptance indicated that educators collectively agree that there is educational and social benefit for all students, exceptional and non-exceptional, and that the major responsibility for inclusive education lies with the regular classroom teacher (Bunch, Lupart, & Brown, 1997). Nevertheless, the pedagogical and organizational dimensions of inclusion still fall far seriously short of the goal. Why is this the case? Despite the appearance of much progress toward inclusion in schools across Canada, the continuing, undue separation of regular and special education remains. This has meant a continuation of change effort fragmentation, a duplication of services, and a discontinuity in instruction for atypical and typical learners (Wang, 1996).

Significantly, Lupart and Webber (1996) note that change efforts for regular education systems have been aligned to support the goal of improved schools and fostering excellence. In response to a widespread public belief that students in Canada are falling behind students in comparison to other leading industrial nations, school change efforts such as raising standards of performance, school governance, and professional development have been initiated. These efforts have renewed our commitment to achieve and maintain high expectations for continued prosperity and maximal development of our human resources and talents (Keating, 1996) and a recognition that a change in

educational organization and resource deployment is required (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Lupart, McKeough, & Yewchuk, 1996).

Paradoxically educators representing either a regular or special education perspective, see inclusion and excellence efforts as an either/or undertaking, and that a move to support one necessarily detracts from the other. The ultimate example of how traditional structures have paralyzed school transformation efforts can be found in the education of students who are gifted. Recognized as a “special needs programming” issue in most school jurisdictions, students with high ability and talent have to be successfully processed via the 5-box “special education approach” before they receive something different from what is typically offered them in regular education. Even though the goal of educational excellence is valued by the regular education system, the incongruities (e.g., gifted education is special education and therefore must be implemented by the special education system) and inconsistencies (e.g., other areas of student exceptionality are more needy) of a dual education system make it almost impossible for most gifted students to receive the “special needs programming” they require (Lupart, 1992b; Lupart & Pyryt, 1996). The unfortunate reality within most contemporary schools is that inclusive schooling is viewed as an optional or discretionary responsibility, rather than a core value of the system (Bunch & Valeo, 1996; Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998). As Yewchuk (1996) appropriately points out the “special needs programming” that students with high ability require will remain elusive “until that utopian day when all teachers really can provide adequate opportunities for extension, enrichment, and acceleration of the curriculum for all students, including the most capable, in their heterogeneous classrooms” (p. 186). Authentic inclusion requires the simultaneous commitment for excellence and equity in our schools.

To this end, Skrtic (1991), a critical analyst of professional culture and school organization, argues for a move away from current educational bureaucratic systems toward educational “adhocracy”, an alternative school organizational structure and professional culture that is premised on the principle of innovation. Skrtic (1995) notes: “In political terms the institution of public

education cannot be democratic unless practices are excellent and equitable. In organizational terms public education's practices cannot be excellent and equitable unless its organizations are adhocratic. In structural and cultural terms school organizations and the professionals who staff them can neither become nor remain adhocratic without the uncertainty of student diversity. In the adhocratic school, educational equity is a pre condition for educational excellence" (p.775).

As a plausible means of moving toward the goal of achieving simultaneous equity and excellence in schools across Canada, Smith and Lusthaus (1995) introduce the concept of continuous student progress. This concept captures the best alternative for schools wishing to promote both high equity and high quality, by placing the focus on the demonstration of the continuous progress of every student. Thus, a student with strong ability and talent in all academic areas would demonstrate progress by continuous, rapid advancement through and understanding of curriculum materials at an advanced grade level. Progress for the 12 year old student with severe, multiple handicaps might be sustained eye-contact for a 10 second interval. In both cases, the indicators are based on the characteristics and learning potential of the individual student, not some arbitrary, or artificial standard of excellence.

A second factor that figures prominently in the school change literature is that there appears to be a notable imbalance of initiatives that have been predominantly top-down, quick-fix, low cost, and outsider-driven and there has been insufficient involvement and consideration of those most closely connected with the school culture; teachers, administrators, parents and students. Cuban (1996), for example, makes a distinction between incremental and fundamental change, arguing that we often experience the situation, in education, where proposed fundamental changes become incremental change. He notes that "innovative programs that reduce class size, integrate subject matter from diverse disciplines, and structure activities that involve students in their learning often begin as classroom experiments, but, over time, migrate to peripheral programs or distant sites such as magnet schools. The schools have indeed adopted and implemented programs fundamentally different from what mainstream students receive. Yet it is the outsiders--students

labeled as potential dropouts, vocational students, pregnant teenagers, those identified as gifted, at-risk students, and pupils with disabilities-- who participate in the innovative programs. Thus, some basic changes get encapsulated, like a grain of sand in an oyster; they exist within the system but are often separated from mainstream programs" (p. 77).

In support of this view, Davern, Sapon-Shevin, D'Aquanni, Fisher, Larson, Black, & Minondo (1997) have noted that "clear distinctions between comprehensive and coherent inclusive practices and partial or fragmented efforts" (p. 31) must be made. Many initiatives that are being implemented under the guise of inclusion are based upon faulty conceptions of student ability and disability, and outmoded traditional special education notions and practices. Authentic inclusion means full participation of all teachers and students in an open, unified learning community and shared responsibility for continuous growth and progress. Schools and educational professionals of the future will require a unified educational framework that can incorporate the full complement of contemporary research and practice.

A third factor for failed school change and reform within a dual education system is due to conflicting perspectives and conceptualizations of what makes for school improvement in general, and improved school organization and governance, teaching and teacher development, curriculum, and student outcomes, in particular. For example, it is a common belief that there will be significant funding increases associated with inclusive education. Smith (1992) examined the funding issues in the context of implementation of inclusive education in Quebec. One major conclusion was that "implementing a policy of inclusive education requires not only a change in attitudes and instructional practice, it requires a change in the manner in which resources are "packaged" and distributed. The old model of allocating resources on the basis of enclosed class ratios is as outmoded as the enclosed classes themselves" (p. 70). In other words, schools need to come up with a funding model that matches the intents of inclusion, ideally one that begins with the assumption that all students will be in general education classes as a rule, not as the exception. To this end, Stainback & Stainback (1996) point out that dollars and personnel that previously went

into segregated special and compensatory education programs can be integrated with the educational mainstream to provide any required specialized knowledge, reduce class sizes, and promote informal support networks.

Another example of conflicting perspectives is that improved student outcomes for students with exceptional learning needs, have been largely dependent on provincial and territorial legislation and school policy. In an attempt to accommodate the more general societal values of individual diversity and inclusion, all provincial and territorial ministries and departments of education have made significant changes in school legislation and policy over the past 20 years (Andrews & Lupart, 1993; Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Smith & Foster, 1996; Winzer, 1996). Although most contemporary schools offer equal educational opportunity for students with exceptional learning needs through special entitlements including non-discrimination, access to schooling, identification, placement, participation of parents, service delivery and advocacy (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Smith & Foster, 1996), most provinces/territories have serious limitations in more than a few of these areas. Moreover, such practice, though intended to improve the educational services of students with exceptional learning needs, simply reinforces a deficit connotation of student difference and the separation of students with exceptional educational needs from the educational mainstream.

Taking this issue to schools in general, a related and significant difficulty is that the individual provincial and territorial legislative policies are in a state of perpetual revision, so it is virtually impossible to determine what degree of actual progress has been made in Canada in support of inclusive education, or any other matter within the scope of educational interest or improvement. Smith (1994) notes that lacking a pan-Canadian level education office to assemble educational policy data, educational researchers and policy analysts are faced with the arduous task of independently compiling information from “twelve independent jurisdictions and an equal variety of approaches to the collection and publication of policy data” (p. 84). How can educators in Canada make informed decisions about school policy and school change if they can’t even access

the data and information?

A fourth factor contributing to lack of success in school change efforts is the simplistic belief that support for an ideology of inclusion can be readily translated into classroom practice. Whereas most educators support the notion of inclusion and feel that regular classroom teachers should have the primary responsibility for the full spectrum of student diversity, they do not believe that they have the necessary supports nor the professional preparation to implement inclusion (Bunch, Lupart, & Brown, 1997). A continuous reduction of student diversity in regular classrooms over the past 30 years has left many teachers, unable or unwilling to reach out beyond regular teaching and instructional practice. The special education model has taught regular teachers that they cannot handle special needs children, and this is generally confirmed by teacher preparation programs that are separate for special and general education. Inclusion cannot be achieved solely through the efforts of ardent inclusion advocates, who typically have ample special education expertise and experience. In fact, successful inclusion depends primarily on the efforts of all classroom teachers and those who support them. Lupart (1996) notes: “Quite simply it comes down to what the individual teacher knows (professional preparation and experience) and how this knowledge is utilized on a day-to-day basis in the school and classroom (instructional planning and delivery) to ensure that the full learning potential of every student is developed” (p. 267).

All current trends indicate that general classroom teachers are increasingly expected to assume primary responsibility for a full range of learners in inclusive classrooms. How well prepared are general classroom teachers to assume this responsibility? A recent study by Tomlinson, Callahan, Tomchin, Eiss, Imbeau, and Landrum (1997) examined over three years the preservice and initial teaching experiences of 70 novice teachers on issues associated with addressing academic diversity in contemporary classrooms. Their findings indicated that there are clear differences between the instructional decision making and instructional practices of novice and expert teachers, and that we cannot assume that teachers with many years of teaching experience will automatically teach like an expert. The authors conclude that for teachers to become true architects of inclusive communities of

learning "it will be necessary for them to develop images of classrooms where teachers teach for understanding rather than coverage; where assessment is a tool directly concerned with individual growth; where students are helped to develop frameworks of meaning; and where students are engaged with tasks that are relevant, varied, and specifically designed to ensure that each student grow every day" (p. 280).

Teachers are the architects who must invent the means for successful inclusion. The challenge is to do the most with what there is and to work toward continuous improvement. Adaptive, differentiated programming to serve individual, student-centered learning must be nurtured in all classrooms across Canada, and all existing educational resources will need to be aligned to support this goal. Invention proceeds with every challenge teachers and students face and overcome. The journey continues every day, every month, every year, as students carry out their work, and there is no final destination. Teachers are as diverse as their students. Some will welcome the notion of an inclusive learning culture because it goes well with their personal theory of teaching; others will not. As teachers, however, the professional basis of the work is to promote the learning of students and their professional competence is shaped by the work they do. Challenged by the diversity that is the natural complement of any student group, all teachers share the professional expectation of blending ideology with practice. If the schools chart a course of creating inclusive learning cultures, this understanding and commitment is implicit.

A fifth and final factor for the present discussion is the need to end the isolation of regular and special education teachers and to establish workable methods for blending separate, expertise and knowledge bases, into a unified system of educational programming that appropriately serves the educational needs of all students. Teachers are the key individuals in making inclusion successful, and therefore investing in teachers would be the most viable way to promote positive school change (Wang, 1996). The inevitability of greater student diversity within the general education classroom makes it imperative that *all* teachers and *all* students work together collaboratively and cooperatively. This means that schools must focus on the important tasks of creating learning

environments that will maximize whatever learning potential is there, using best practices and participating in the process of inventing even better ones. Much of what we know about supporting students with exceptional learning needs has been developed and practiced within special education contexts. Indeed, Skrtic (1996) makes a strong case that student diversity is the source of invention and the potential within teachers and students is what drives it. This critical knowledge base must not be left to wither and die as we close down the special education classrooms. Instead we must search out new ways to learn from each other. Many leading educators have suggested a move toward collaborative consultation and inclusive teaming (Idol, 1996; Johnson & Pugach, 1996; Wong, 1996).

Idol (1996) describes collaborative consultation as “an interactive process that enables teams of people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems. The outcome is enhanced and altered from the original solutions that any team member would produce independently’ (p. 222). Within any school or educational system, teachers excel at different areas and have different knowledge bases, and collaboration offers the opportunity for teachers to learn form one another. The interaction provides the opportunity for mutual professional growth (Wong, 1996).

Johnson and Pugach (1996) have suggested that the evolution of collaborative teaming over the past two decades, has occurred over three waves of transition in contemporary schools. The first wave is associated with the notion of expert consultation, the second wave experimenting with collaboration as joint problem solving, and the third wave in which collaboration is considered the foundation of teaching. Each wave has helped to forge an increasingly sophisticated and effective framework for shared professional responsibility for successful inclusion.

Collaboration is both necessary for inclusion to succeed and as an outcome of its implementation (Gartner & Lipsky, 1996). The benefits of collaboration and reframing relationships within the schools and the wider community have recently been promulgated in the regular education school change literature (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998), and this hopefully

represents the beginning of the establishment of authentic common grounds to support inclusion. The future promise of the present wave of collaboration is the possibility of harnessing the talents, creativity and expertise of the entire learning community toward school-wide, continuous improvement without obstruction from artificial barriers such as hierarchical divisions of authority, and institutionalized isolation of teachers. The efficacious goal of authentic learning partnerships among school staff and students will be a powerful framework for developing the kind of learning community in schools throughout Canada that will ultimately produce a caring and civilized society in the 21st century.

Conclusion: Moving Forward in a Time of Change

The potential pool of abilities and talent to lead our society into the information age of the twenty-first century is in our schools right now and teachers are the stewards with the expertise and professional obligation to help actualize this potential. This will not happen if students and teachers continue to work in contexts that isolate them from one another, and if schools have to bear all the responsibility for school change. As Keating (1996) very eloquently points out, schools represent an enormous collective investment in the social infrastructure in Canada, and successful students are fundamental to the continued well-being and prosperity of society. Thus, moving forward in schools depends primarily on teachers and students, but the responsibility to support and develop a learning culture must be shared by all sectors of society (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Lupart, 1996). Moving forward for schools and teachers means drawing widely from the pool of experience, talent, wisdom and knowledge within and outside the discipline and creating means for continuous application and development in every school. The possibilities are infinite, but at the present time, they are limited by what teachers know and what they do. Thus the immediate agenda for schools is to facilitate the maximization of student and teacher potential.

Special Needs Programming Issues

- Support advocacy agencies have been formed to support separate interest areas, typically defined by student category, specific to the child's pathological condition (e.g., The

Roeher Institute; CMEC; Canadian Association for Community Living; Canadian Association for Learning Disabilty). The result is continued fragmentation of efforts at building inclusive schools (Andrews & Lupart, 1993; Davern, Sapon-Shevin, D'Aquanni, Fisher, Larson, Black, & Minondo, 1997).

- Educators and related partners in "special needs programming" use terms such as integration, mainstreaming, normalization and inclusion interchangeably, and this causes extreme confusion in the field and literature. The latter term represents the inclusive education approach, whereas the first three refer to traditional special education assumptions.
- Research and publication efforts carried out by authors and researchers in Canada are scattered across areas of student exceptionality, across disciplines, across information dissemination sources (i.e., articles, policies, books, research reports, presentations); and across local, provincial/territorial, national and international boundaries.
- The most unfortunate outcome is that many educators and individuals interested in topics associated with special needs programming will look to either local provincial and territorial information sources or to the abundant special education literature generated in the United States. The differences in the educational issues and systems of our two countries are so profound that we must seriously question the relevance to schools in Canada (Hutchinson, 1996).
- School organization has typically been hierarchical and separate for special and regular education. Inclusion requires horizontal organization, and a unified system of education.
- Excellence and equity have been seen as oppositional, yet successful inclusion demands both. Contemporary inclusive schools need to be seen as a societal tool for student empowerment, not as an instrument of selective mobility.
- Teachers are the necessary architiects of successful inclusion, and the synthesis of separate expertise and experience of regular and special education, must be achieved in ideology and practice in all classrooms.

Research Questions

(1) What is the current educator understanding of the term inclusive education?

(2) How can we promote an accurate, coordinated understanding and practice of inclusive education in Canada?

(3) What changes are necessary for schools, universities, government, and advocacy groups to align future efforts in support of inclusion?

(4) Are there particular innovations in regular and special education teacher collaboration or teaming that promote a sysnthesis of expertise and practice?

(5) How can we accurately assess the success or failure of innovations to promote inclusion?

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