

*Students with Exceptional Learning Needs: At-Risk, Utmost*

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## Abstract

For too long Canadian schools have been chasing the notion of a standard “one size fits all” approach within our public education systems. Though students with obvious disabilities were generally excluded from public education for the first half of the century, all others were expected to meet some sort of “minimal standard.” As the public education systems grew and developed over the ensuing decades, it was gradually recognized that standard curriculum, standard achievement, and standard outcomes were not appropriate for a considerable portion of students attending community schools. Consequently, existing systems were reconfigured to allow schools to “decouple” certain students who were deemed to be at-risk for failure in the school. Beginning in the 1960s, all Canadian schools adopted programs and policies to promote the “special education” of children with exceptional learning needs. Special programs, specially trained teachers, special instructional techniques, and special educational services were developed and proliferated.

Consequently, schools have evolved to include a dual approach to education; one for students with exceptionalities, and one for all other “regular” students. These separate systems appeared to serve the needs of students in a satisfactory way, until certain conflicting realities became widespread around the 1980s. Decreased funding, limited resources, rising expectations, increased accountability, and calls for equity and excellence were all instrumental in creating a swelling tide of dissatisfaction in public schools, and a negative impression of the quality of education for all students in general, and students with exceptional learning needs in particular.

Although the calls for reform in the education of children with exceptional learning needs have been primarily directed toward increased equity and inclusion, it would seem that the message has not been well understood in regular education. There is a continuing, lingering, resistance to adopt authentic inclusive education practice in community schools and regular classrooms. The problems and issues this creates are not only limited to what happens in the schools. Unfortunately the long term disadvantages and risks for individuals who are identified as special needs and removed from the general education classes and programs are magnified when the individual leaves the public education system and begins the transition to adult family, career and community life roles.

In this paper, the arduous advances in the progressive inclusion of students with exceptional learning needs in regular education classrooms and community schools are traced over the past century. The serious gaps in the education of students with special needs that put them at great risk for failure in our schools and ultimately in our society are reviewed. The research and literature covering the relevant efforts of teachers and other support professionals will be reviewed and summarized. In addition, there will be a focus on the need for effective transition practices and procedures, to ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop their abilities and talents to the fullest extent. Finally, I will provide an analysis of some of the current most promising practices for successful inclusion in neighborhood schools and the community.

## Introduction

There have been a number of publications in recent years that reveal a rather grim picture of most likely outcomes for students with disabilities and special needs (Fawcett, 1996; Nuefeld & Stevens, 1992; Roeher Institute, 1994). For every standard indicator that is put forward, when compared to their non-disabled peers, persons with disabilities are disadvantaged. They are less likely to finish high school, they are less likely to be employed, if they are employed, they are likely to have lower earnings, and in the case of disabled females, they are more likely to be a lone parent and living in poverty. Individuals with disabilities and exceptional needs have been, for too long, on the margins of society. They are at-risk for failure in our school systems, and they are ultimately at-risk for full participation in our society. They are at risk because our institutions are organized in ways that support the majority, and those most different from the norm have little choice but to try to fit into the systems that are in place. The systems that are in place are not malleable enough to support all those who enter, and we seem to accept the view that it is OK that some of our citizens will not be able to develop to their full potential. Most Canadians are provided with adequate, formal learning opportunities in our schools, that prepare them to become productive, contributing members of society as adults. Indeed, this expectation is taken for granted, however, for children with disabilities and exceptional learning needs, just gaining the right to enter into the schoolhouse door has been a long, hard struggle. Are we prepared to support the learning success of those who struggle most within the systems we have created? Unfortunately, the dream of having an individually appropriate education is still elusive to most and despite the rhetoric of inclusion of students with exceptional needs, the reality is that we still have a long way to go before these students are truly, authentically included in our schools and our communities.

#### A Century of Progressive Inclusion of Students with Exceptional Needs

There has been a steady, forward shift toward inclusion within our schools and our country over the past century, however, earliest times were significantly isolationist and derogatory for those considered exceptional. Beginning with early history, it has been widely noted that individuals who were deemed “different” from others in the community often fell subject to much suffering and in many cases, death. People with obvious handicaps were either ostracized or abandoned, from the communities they were born into. To have such ill fortune was a plague on the family, and it was widely sanctioned for parents to practice euthanasia (Winzer, 1996). Thus, the predominant theme for those considered “exceptional” or “handicapped” in early Canada was “exclusion.”

Education in Canada in the 1800s was strictly reserved for the children from privileged classes. However, during the two decades preceding the turn of the century, as the country began to grow and prosper, there was considerable emphasis put on the development of a public education system. All efforts and resources were duly allocated to provide Canadian children with a basic education, giving particular emphasis on learning to read and write. Even though education was still not available to many, the impact of industrialization and new child welfare laws contributed to a positive, emerging view that schools were a vehicle for improvement of individuals and society, a view that predominated in the first fifty years of public education.

There were essentially no provisions for children with disabilities within the public schools, until well into the 1900s. Children with visible handicaps such as visual impairment or hearing impairment were the first to receive care, usually under the supervision of a medical doctor, in residential settings. At first these institutions were small, cottage-like buildings, similar

to the European model of the time, and emphasis was on their care and individualized education. Several provinces established special residential schools, such as the Winnipeg School for the Deaf and the Frederick Fraser School for the Blind in Halifax, that were built within this time period. Unfortunately, others, children who were from poor families, children who were disabled and emotionally disturbed were often abandoned and set adrift in the local communities. Their fate was determined by the charity of those who found them, and custodial care was the norm as these already disadvantaged children were considered unworthy of an education (Stainback, Stainback, & Bunch, 1989). As the numbers of homeless and abandoned children grew, more residential facilities such as institutions, asylums, and orphanages were built, principally in Ontario and Quebec. Clumped together in a large, single facility, one would find children who were deaf, blind, mentally retarded, crippled, delinquent, and vagrant – these facilities were not much more than human warehouses that were dumping grounds for young children rejected by their families (Winzer, 1990). Fortunately, educational reformers of the time were able to influence public attitudes sufficiently to support a demand for reformatories and trade schools, where these children would be trained in a vocation with the expectation that they would become self-sufficient as adults. These efforts dovetailed with the growing emphasis on mandatory, publicly funded education for all children.

For the first fifty years into the twentieth century, there was only limited educational provision for students with exceptional needs within the public education system. Their care and education was typically left up to parents, and often with the support of the church, some form of group care was established in homes and churches across the country. In the few instances where children with handicaps were allowed into the public schools, they would receive their education in separate, residential schools, or in special classes in regular schools. And, as was the practice of the time, if a child, born to parents in Western Canada, was visually impaired, the only educational option was to send the child to a residential school such as the Frederick Fraser School in Halifax. For other students with exceptional needs, notably the mentally disabled, this time period flamed a counter movement that focused on the hereditary permanence of “feble-mindedness” and the belief that mental retardation was the cause of most of society’s problems including crime, delinquency, poverty, prostitution, and immorality (Lusthaus & Lusthaus, 1992). Consequently the practices of mandatory segregation and sterilization were sanctioned in most communities. Indeed, the latter practice was only recently eliminated from existing legislation by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1986.

It was during the 1950s and 1960s that parents began to lobby for services for their exceptional needs children. Advocacy groups like the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded (currently the Canadian Association for Community Living) and the Canadian Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities, became powerful influences on future education direction and the growth of special education within the public school systems. At the time, services that were informally provided for children with exceptional learning needs, in most provinces “operated separately from the education system, with parents, volunteers, and occasionally trained teachers mostly responsible for funding, developing, and delivering instructional programs” (Andrews & Lupart, 2000, p. 33). From these settings came educational practices that were more personalized and relevant to the needs of the students, and this precedent was an important factor as public schools gradually began to assume greater responsibility by creating special classes for children with exceptional needs in regular schools. Most often these services were organized and implemented on the basis of classification and categorical distinctions. Concomitantly, schools began to use testing and assessment procedures as the

principle means of diagnosis and labelling of different categories of special needs children. Thus, began a system of educational service provision, for students with exceptional learning needs, recognized today as “Special Education.” Andrews and Lupart (2000) describe the traditional referral, testing, labelling, placement, and programming processes practiced in the 50s and 60s, as the five-box “special education approach.” Importantly, this “special education approach” cut a sharp wedge in the public education services of the time, and would later become a sophisticated, competing system of education in the decades to come.

Despite the fact that the “special education approach” perpetuated the isolation and segregation of students with exceptional needs, educators rationalized that the special students were better served in special classes because of reduced pupil-teacher ratios, special teaching methods, resources, equipment, and programs that were particularly geared to the unique needs of each category of students. More important, parents and advocacy groups, jubilant at the victory of winning a place for their children in the public education system, were generally satisfied with the special education classes that were set up. In fact, there was a proliferation of special education classes and exceptional student categories in public schools throughout the country that didn’t stop until well into the 1980s. For example, records indicate that in Alberta in 1950, there were 256 identified exceptional students, in 16 classrooms across the province, and there were three categories of student exceptionality that were recognized (Church, 1980; Alberta Education, 1989). In just under three decades, in 1979, these numbers mushroomed to 23,701 identified special needs students, 1,720 special classes, and 15 recognized categories. This trend was similar in all other provinces and territories, and the increases in categories and classes, were consistently large and significant. By the early 1980s special education had become a huge, specialized, bureaucratic system, with its’ own specialized programs, services, and personnel. The extent and range of educational services that were being offered to students with exceptional students in the public education system included individual education programs, curriculum modifications, special devices, special classroom arrangements, counselling services, speech/language therapy, occupational/physiotherapy, other therapies, medical services, and social services. Small wonder that when school districts experienced continuous funding cuts throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the special education system was in direct competition with the regular education system, as both resources and personnel started to decline.

Oddly enough it was the broader, public commitment to the social welfare and normalization of individuals with disabilities in communities across Canada, that led to the demise of special education within the public education system (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Wolfensberger, W., Nirge, B., Olshansky, S., Perske, R., & Roos, P., 1972). Beginning in the 1970s, the influence of the civil rights movement and the federal legislation Public Law 94-142 passed in 1975 in the United States, as well as the growing social commitment in Canada, to foster normalization practices for persons with disabilities and handicaps in our communities, led to certain conceptual changes in Canadian public schools. First, came the notion of “integration”, the parallel educational concept to normalization in society. As it was commonly practiced, this simply entailed the removal of segregated special needs students from the special education classroom and placing them in regular classrooms. It wasn’t too long before complaints from both teachers and parents were voiced. How could we expect special education students, who had been removed from the regular education classroom, to be returned to the very setting where they had failed in the first place? In an attempt to improve regular classroom services for students with exceptional needs, in the 1980s, schools had to have an individualized education program developed and approved by the child’s parent(s), and all special services and curriculum

modifications were to be clearly specified and planned out beforehand. For many students with exceptional learning needs this meant that they would spend most of their time in a regular classroom setting with some within classroom modification, and/or some specialized pull-out classes, as promulgated by the highly influential Deno Cascade of Services (Deno, 1970). These “symbols” and “ceremonies” as Skrtic (1996) calls them, became the norm for what was generally referred to as “mainstreaming.” Fashioned after U.S. special education systems, Canadian students with special education needs were placed in the “least restrictive environment” and were removed from special settings and placements to more normal educational settings as soon as possible. Unfortunately, even though the services were up-dated and offered some regular class experience for most students, the onus was still placed on the individual with special needs to change in ways that would allow regular education to fit them into the “one size fits all” system of regular education.

Around the 1990s, there was the inclusive education movement, which emphasized a unified system of education in which all students could be provided with an appropriate education (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Lupart, 1998). Adopting a platform of human minority rights, proponents argued that schools needed to change classroom instruction and educational services to meet the diverse needs of all students. If there were obstacles to the learning of any student, these were to be removed and/or adjusted so as to ensure their successful learning and development. Unfortunately, the move brought with it, sufficient misunderstanding and distrust, that the majority of school systems became paralyzed in a battle over regular and special education funding and resources, and opportunistic administrators began to systemically close down special education classrooms under the false guise of promoting inclusive education. The ultimate paradox was that philosophy of inclusion that schools and school boards were promoting was in direct contradiction to actual practice. More and more students were being identified as requiring special education, and regular classroom teachers were becoming less tolerant of student diversity in their regular classrooms. Turning again to Alberta Education records, data for 1989 and 1992 no longer records special education classes, however, the number of students identified as exceptional learning needs reveals continued increases from 23,701 in 1979, to 36,727 in 1989, and a record 51,711 identified students in 1992. During the same period the number of special needs categories grew from 15 to 20 (Alberta Education, 1992).

In concluding this brief historic overview, it is certainly apparent that many gains have been achieved in our schools and in the provisions to support students with exceptional learning needs. The widely adopted special education approach was embraced in the 1970s and has continued to be a strong element in present day schools. Recently, educational leaders have charged that the approach simply perpetuates the isolation and discrimination of students with exceptional learning needs (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Skrtic, 1996). The special education approach, in practice, allowed schools and regular educators to carry on the way they always have. When certain students were considered to require something different from what was offered in regular education classrooms, they were simply “decoupled” from regular education and put in a special class with a special teacher, and not much else had to change (Skrtic, 1996). This arrangement was successfully practiced for about three decades in Canadian schools, with the apparent satisfaction of regular and special education stakeholders. However, with increasing emphasis on inclusion and the mass return of exceptional students to regular education classrooms in the 1990s, alarms began to sound. Teachers became confused and overwhelmed about their changing roles and responsibilities. Students and parents were raising their concerns about a “watered down curriculum” and the lack of services for students with exceptional learning needs.

Moreover, the boundaries of students considered to be at-risk in our schools spread over to non-traditional special education categories such as students from cultural minorities, students who are culturally different, students who are ESL, and students who are from poverty backgrounds. Clearly, radical change in our educational systems is required.

### What are the Gaps in Educational Provisions for Special Needs Students in Our Current Educational Systems?

Several gaps and limitations can be found in current educational provisions for students with exceptional learning needs (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Bunch, Lupart & Brown, 1997; Bunch & Valeo, 1998; Friend, Bursuck & Hutchinson, 1998; Lupart, McKeough & Yewchuk, 1996).

#### Schools

- 1) Regular class teachers have not changed their teaching practices to provide appropriate instruction for all students.
- 2) School systems are ambiguous about regular class teachers being responsible for the learning progress of students with exceptional learning needs.
- 3) Regular class teachers have not been adequately prepared to work with students with exceptional learning needs.
- 4) Regular class teachers have not been provided with adequate supports such as lowered pupil/teacher ratio and educational assistants.
- 5) Regular classroom teachers do not have sufficient time to consult and collaborate with special education teachers and parents.
- 6) The role expectations for regular and special education teachers are not clear.
- 7) School administrators rarely have an adequate knowledge base in special education and/or inclusion.
- 8) School policies and practices continue to be aimed at the mythical “average child” and minimum standards keep being raised.

#### Students

- 1) Students still need to be identified as exceptional needs before they receive special programming and instruction.
- 2) Students with special needs must successfully proceed through the 5-boxes of the special education approach before they receive something that is different from regular class instruction.
- 3) The time period from initial referral to actual programming change can take up to six months, and even longer.
- 4) The costs involved in identification and diagnostic testing, and in some provinces coding, consume an inordinate proportion of the available funding.
- 5) An exceptional needs student may receive special accommodation in elementary school, and yet be without any assistance in junior or senior high.
- 6) There is insufficient “transition” planning from one level of education to the next and minimal school to workplace transition accommodations and procedures.

- 7) Programming options, particularly at the high school level, are often inappropriate for students with exceptional learning needs.

### Promising Directions for Authentic Inclusive Education Practice

#### Diversity and Disability: New Perspectives

Skrtic (1991; 1996) has been a forceful critic on the limitations of traditional views concerning special education and the prevalent views on disability. He asserts that several inaccurate assumptions underlie special education practices: “(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). These claims are further supported by Hahn (1989) who has proposed an ideological shift from the traditional view of individuals with disabilities, which he refers to as “functional limitations,” to a more constructive perspective of “minority rights.” He asserts that such a shift will move the onus for change from the individual with the disability to the changes needed in our institutions and practices that will allow persons with disabilities to acquire the same basic rights that all Canadian citizens have. This can only be achieved through the “deconstruction” of the notion of disability and ability, and the removal of all obstacles and barriers that make it difficult for many individuals to achieve their full potential.

Beyond outdated perceptions of disability, we need to create learning communities in our schools that do truly value student diversity. Over the past three decades there have been new cognitive theories and ample educational research support to indicate that each individual has a unique set of abilities, that can be actualized through appropriate learning activities and opportunities (Bruner, 1986; Gardner, 1993; McKeough & Lupart, 1991). There should be sufficient flexibility in the ways we deploy our resources in schools to obtain maximum benefits for all students. A continuation of our standard grade by grade, subject by subject approach to regular classroom instruction is inconsistent with what we now know about the way children learn. Recognizing and celebrating student diversity will be an important element in our achieving authentic inclusive classrooms.

#### Restructuring of Schools

The notion of merging the current separate systems of education into a unified system of education that can meet the needs of all students has been around for at least two decades (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Stainback, Stainback & Forest, 1989). Although the idea of reconstructing our public school systems into a unified system of education that captures the best of what we have in regular education and special education is appealing to many, finding the ways and means of actually doing this has been difficult. There is no lack of strategies and approaches that have been tried, from top-down government directives and legislation to promote integration, to individual classroom teachers making changes in their design and delivery of instruction so that all students within the classroom can experience learning progress and success. The biggest problem is for systems to align their efforts so that they are

consistent with the goal of authentic inclusion. This means that government departments or ministries of education, teacher preparation programs, school boards, teacher unions and advocacy groups all need to review their policies and practices and if they run counter to the promotion of inclusion, then the necessary changes must be made. Moreover, in Canada, with our separate provincial and territorial educational jurisdictions, it makes it that much more difficult to share our best practices and knowledge systems, and to assess how we are making progress as a country. Without a federal department of education, as is the case for the United States, it is immensely difficult to even access the policies and legislation that is in place.

### The Excellence/Equity Dilemma

There are very few publications that attempt to describe the changes and reforms that have taken place in Canadian schools from a combined special education and regular education perspective. Certainly we can recognize leaders such as Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves (Fullan, 1991; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998) as key proponents of school reform in Canada, but they tend not to deal with the issues surrounding students with exceptional learning needs and equity. In a similar vein, Andrews and Lupart (2000) and Hutchinson (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998), have been instrumental in advancing the notion of the progressive inclusion of students with exceptional learning needs, and yet they give minimal attention to general education reforms. In a recent analysis that does attempt to combine regular and special education change and reform literature, Lupart and Webber (1996) note it's as if the changes were taking place on two separate planes, with regular education leaders representing the ways and means to foster excellence in our schools, and special education leaders representing ways and means to foster equity in our schools. Paradoxically, the kinds of changes stemming from regular education, such as improvements in professional development and raising performance standards, would further reduce the prospects for greater equity, and vice versa. Consequently, schools have operated with one goal or the other as their focus, overlooking the possibility that both goals might be simultaneously achieved.

Recent publications by Skrtic (1991; 1995; 1996) and by Smith and Lusthaus (1995) make a strong case for schools to promote both goals simultaneously; indeed authentic inclusion requires it. Skrtic (1991; 1995) provides a critical analysis of professional culture and school organization, and he concludes that educational equity is a pre condition for educational excellence. He stresses the need for schools to shed their current bureaucratic systems, and free professional teachers to invent future and better ways to support student diversity through a system of "adhocracy". By increasing the professional uncertainty that student diversity creates in the school, teachers advance their own professional growth through meeting the challenge of providing appropriate instruction for all students. Hence, teachers and students, are supported in their life-long learning pursuit. In support of this notion, Smith and Lusthaus (1995) have advanced the idea that each student should demonstrate that they are making continuous progress as a result of their schooling experiences. Rather than one or some ill-defined minimum standards that at the outset are impossible for some students to achieve, indicators of continuous progress in excellence and equity stem from the abilities and talents of the students. Recognizing that all students and their learning potentials are unique, can help us to envision the adhocracy-like organization of our future schools, where there are no artificial age, grade, subject barriers such as expecting all eight year olds to learn all the subjects (i.e., math, science, social, literacy), taught all in one way and all at the same time.

### Teachers are Key

The final area of consideration for future promise of authentic inclusion in our schools is to recognize that teachers are the key individuals to support the learning of every child. Teachers are the school-based professionals who have a lengthy, personal relationship with each child in their classrooms. They are the ones who take the knowledge base as it is presented in our school curriculums, and who chart the course for the learning success of their students. Thirty years of separate special education instruction has shown us that every child is capable of making continuous progress, no matter how limited one's ability, no matter how small the gain. Accordingly, many special education teachers have found limited value in the precise, identification and diagnosis of students. Though it might be considered a somewhat simplistic idea by some, it is recommended that we stroke out all of the first four boxes of the special education approach, as an immediate and effective means of moving toward authentic inclusion. If the huge cost savings that would be made by doing this were then shifted right over to the important programming box, teachers' would have the supports they have been seeking in reduced pupil teacher ratios, they would have more flexibility and options for professional assistance, and perhaps even adequate time to carry out the important collaboration and consultation with other educational professionals and parents.

Obviously, a major transformation like this isn't going to happen quickly. What has been successfully practiced in regular and special education classes over the past thirty years now needs to become the knowledge base of all educators, and new ways of sharing, collaborating and learning from and with our professional colleagues, as an accepted process of lifelong learning, will need to be invented. Fullan (1991), nicely summed up what it will take by stating that "educational change depends on what teachers think and do – it's as simple and complex as that" (p. 107). And, it might be of some comfort for all teachers to remember that high incidence students with learning disabilities, mild developmental delay, mild behavior disorder, and students who are gifted, who are most likely to show progress in future inclusive classrooms, were all in the regular classroom thirty years ago before special education became the large, separate system it is. By including all students in their community schools and regular classrooms, and making sure that all students are making continuous progress, the schools can model what an inclusive community should look like.

### Conclusion

The paradoxes and inconsistencies in our ways and means of attempting to serve the needs of all students who come through our schoolhouse door, can be eliminated. In order to do this, we have to make choices. If we are prepared to support authentic, inclusion in our schools, then we must be prepared to adopt the simultaneous goals of equity and excellence. Thus committed, we must reject the current school structures and procedures that perpetuate the view that education is an instrument of selective mobility, and instead they must be seen as tools for empowerment of all students (Marcoulides & Heck, 1990). In conclusion, the words of Edmonds (1979) are most fitting: "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't done it so far" (p. 29).

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