



Why Inclusive Education is Preferable to Special Education

By Dr. Gary Bunch

Disability and Inclusive Education

(Extracted with permission from Gary Bunch's blog, 2009)

I am really interested in inclusive education and disability. When the issue is disability, inclusive education means kids with disabilities are educated in the same classes as all the other kids. This, as you likely know, is a big change from special education. The big difference is that special education believes that some students with disabilities need to be segregated from their typical peers. They must go to special classes or special schools. There is no segregation in inclusion.

Special education was a boon to kids with disabilities when it began to take off around the middle of the last century. Before that, kids with disabilities mostly were not in school. The growth of special education meant that they could get an education, even though they had to go to segregated settings. At that time, special education was a really big change – and a positive one.

But change does not stop. Progress continues to be made. New and better ways to do things are found. That does not mean that the older ways were bad. It just means that new ideas and new ways to do things have been found, and that they do a better job than the older ideas and methods.

That is what is happening in education for learners with disabilities. We have learned that inclusion in regular classrooms of community schools is better education than is exclusion. Teachers, who used to practice special education methods, but now have moved to inclusion, have found it to work. The needs the students have do not disappear when students with diverse abilities are included. Inclusive education requires all the supports that special education does, but the support is delivered in the regular classroom, not in a special setting. When they are included, almost every kid is happier. They are



accepted. They learn. In fact, research is now saying that inclusive education is better for all the kids. Those with disabilities learn from their typical peers. Their typical peers benefit from having more diversity in their classroom. They learn lessons about life that are not taught in textbooks, and they have a more complete understanding of what community means. The United Nations recognized this when it declared its policy of Education For All, and said that education in the regular classroom is the right of all learners. Inclusive education is more socially just for all and leads to stronger education for all.

That doesn't mean that everyone agrees with inclusive education. Not everyone agrees with change. Change upsets some people – especially when that change challenges what they always have believed. Inclusive education is a revolution in how we think about disability and learning. Revolutions tend to create a lot of heat and friction. It takes time for things to settle down and for change to be accepted.

We need to go through the heat and friction of revolutionary change in education to reach social justice for learners with disabilities. The benefits are worthy of the struggle.

Denying the Benefits of Inclusive Education

(Extracted with permission from Gary Bunch's blog, 2010)

Why is inclusive education, educating typical learners and their peers experiencing disabilities in the same classrooms, important for all learners? Why is it important for our entire society?

The right to education was gained by Canadians experiencing disabilities only in the recent past. Prior to approximately the late 1970s and early 1980s, schools did not have to educate learners experiencing disability. Some centers maintained special schools, but few admitted those experiencing disability to regular classroom settings alongside their typical peers. Though some school systems did decide to educate students experiencing disability, there was no legal requirement to do so. Even when some students experiencing disability were admitted to school, it was mostly those with mild and moderate levels of challenge who could cope in acceptable fashion with the academic and behavioural standards of the schools.

But, eventually, provincial and territorial governments began to pass legislation requiring school systems to provide access for students with diverse abilities. The result was increase in the number of special schools and great increase in the number of special classes. Some more capable students experiencing disabilities were admitted, conditionally, to regular class settings. These moves all were in accord with the special



education model under which a student is placed according to individual academic achievement and behavioural quality. The special education model was considered the strongest response to the need to educate learners experiencing disability. One of the negative aspects of the special education model was that students were segregated for their education. This resulted in distancing learners experiencing disabilities from their typical peers, both in school and community. This unfortunate result was considered acceptable in order to maintain strong education.

Today, the special education model is challenged by the inclusive education model. Proponents of inclusive education argue that inclusion will result in a stronger education system and more flexible, accepting communities. Why? What advantages, if any, does the inclusive model have over the existing model still endorsed by the majority of Canadian educational jurisdictions?

Here are a few things we now know about the advantages of the inclusive education model.

- Inclusion in the school system results in more accepting and positive communities and stronger education. Inclusion is supported by the United Nations and its various bodies as the most appropriate answer to issues of diversity and moving forward into the future. To the UN, inclusion is a matter of human rights and social justice.
- Learners experiencing disability achieve at higher academic levels in inclusive settings than in special education settings. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- Learners experiencing disabilities develop greater behavioural strength in inclusive settings. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- The learning of typical learners is not negatively affected by the inclusion of peers experiencing disability. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- The learning of typical learners is strengthened and expanded, particularly in understanding of diversity and equity, by inclusion of learners experiencing disability. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- Inclusion promotes friendships and understanding between typical students and their peers experiencing disabilities. This fact, increasingly, is supported by research.
- Regular classroom teachers, supported by their administrators and specialized resource staff, can teach classes diverse in abilities. This fact, increasingly, is being demonstrated by teachers working in inclusive settings.

The question at the head of this discussion really should be, “Why have so many Canadian governments and educators continued to support the special education approach

when inclusion is a more socially just and effective, and practical approach, not just for learners experiencing disability, but for all students – and for their communities?”

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