Straight Talk About Inclusive Education

By Tim Loreman
Spring 2009

The current review of special education being conducted by Alberta Education ("Setting the direction for special education in Alberta" available at www.education.alberta.ca) which was launched at the CASS/Alberta education Special Education Symposium in Red Deer last May provides an opportunity to discuss many of the contentious issues in special education today. My understanding is that multiple perspectives on this top have already been presented both formally and informally, and further, that sometimes contradictory views on what inclusive education is and is not have been offered.

As an academic with a series of publications and a continued research interest in the area of inclusive education, I would like to take this opportunity to both try and clarify some of the main misunderstanding about inclusion, and to offer a perspective which might provide a basis for further reflection on the issues. As the title suggests, my comments will be direct, and might challenge some existing assumptions.

Defining inclusion

In previous publications (see Loreman, 2009; Loreman, 1999) I have argued that the majority of educators know very well what inclusion is, but that it is sometimes politically expedient for them to manipulate the term to suit whatever practice they happen to be currently engaged in, be it inclusive or not. The term 'inclusion' in an educational context, however, has been well defined and understood in the literature for some time now. Generally accepted definitions of inclusive education contain a number of distinct features. According to these definitions (based here on those provided by Loreman, 1999; Sailor & Skrtic, 1995; Uditsky, 1993; and UNESCO, 1994) inclusive education means:

- All children attend their neighborhood school.
- Schools and districts have a 'zero-rejection' policy when it comes to registering and teaching children in their region. Beyond that, all children are welcomed and valued.
- all children learn in regular, heterogeneous classrooms with same age peers.
- All children follow substantively similar programs of study, with curriculum that can be adapted and modified if needed. Modes of instruction are varied and responsive to the needs of all.
- All children contribute to regular school and classroom learning activities and events.
- All children are supported to make friends and be socially successful with their peers.
- Adequate resources and staff training are provided within the school and district to support inclusion.

True inclusive education cannot take place in environments that substantially deviate from the above definition, which is consistent with the internationally accepted use of the term. Efforts have been made in some places to try and bend the term inclusion to even represent environments in which children are educated in separate environments on the basis of ability. This is obviously not inclusion, and such deliberate attempts to twist the term to mean anything other than children with significant diverse needs being educated in regular classrooms with peers without such needs are simply dishonest.

The efficacy of inclusive education

Over the years the efficacy of inclusive education in terms of academic and social gains, along with the emotional well-being of both children with and without significant special needs, has been questioned. While it is true that the movement supporting inclusion was originally founded on philosophical ideas and the view that it is provided for higher levels of social justice, in recent years there has been much research supporting the approach in terms of direct and measurable positive gains for students.

It is, however, an interesting fact that the efficacy of segregated forms of education for students with special needs is almost never questioned with the same vigor as the efficacy of inclusion. This is just as well for those who support segregated education, because the research evidence in support of this approach is slender indeed (Loreman, 2009; Loreman,

2007; Sobsey, 2005). To the best of my knowledge, after nearly 100 years of segregated education there is yet to be a definitive study or series of studies demonstrating that this approach is superior to inclusion in terms of academic, social, and emotional gains for children. Indeed, the research I am aware of shows quite the opposite is true (Loreman, 2009). Those supporting segregated forms of education should have to prove that it works by presenting the case in research, and school superintendents advocating research-based practice should explicitly and immediately demand it. Otherwise, how can continuing with a segregated approach to education be justified?

There is plenty of research justification for inclusion, which I have outlined in both forthcoming and previous publications (Loreman, 2009; Loreman, 2007; Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005). It results in improved academic gains for both children with disabilities, and those without (see Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Davis, Langone & Malone, 1996; Demeris, Childs & Jordan, 2008; Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro & Goldberg, 1994; Fredickson, Dunsmuir, Lang & Monsen, 2004; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis & Goetz, 1994; McDonnell, Thorson, McQuivey & Kiefer-O'Donnell, 1997; Sharpe, York & Knight, 1994; Sobsey, 2005). Further, there are social and communication benefits to inclusion for all children (Bennett, DeLuca & Bruns, 1997; Kennedy & Shukla, 1997). Well most educators can cite individual, antidotal instances of inclusion not working, the overall picture in research is a positive one. Perhaps where inclusion has not worked it is because it has been inadequately implemented or supported.

Some will, however, continue to be of the view that inclusion is not a realistic option for an entire system to move towards. However, in some European countries, such as Italy, there is virtually full inclusion nation-wide. There are even Albertan examples of this. Pembina Hills Regional School Division #7 (PHRD), which covers territory including Westlock, Barrhead, and northwest to Swan Hills, operates on a district-wide model of inclusion.

The single remaining special program for children with disabilities in the district is in the process of being phased out as existing students are "grandfathered" though. The division motto of "Together we learn" is taken seriously. I am conducting a major federal government funded research project on inclusion in the district with a team of colleagues at Concordia University College of Alberta, the University of Alberta, and the University of Victoria, including Dr. Judy Lupart (Canada Research Chair in Special Education), and Dr. Donna McGhie-Richmond. This project is also being supported with funds from Persons with Developmental Disabilities Northeast Community Board.

The project is still in early stages, but initial survey findings suggest that overall all stakeholder groups including parents, students, teachers, program assistants, and school administrators, are positive about inclusive education and the benefits it brings. Inclusion is clearly working for this district.

This does not mean it is without its tensions or pressure points (what educational initiative is?), But it is apparent that a culture of inclusion has developed in the district over the years, and that the district is prepared to reflect and make adjustments to the ways in which it works in order to benefit all students. It serves as a wonderful potential model for other educational jurisdictions both here in Alberta, and throughout the world.

The issue of choice

Some jurisdictions maintain their segregated schools and classrooms for students with special needs because they say it offers parents much needed choice. I take the unpopular position in Alberta by not agreeing with the notion of choice when it comes to special education. I have been told that my position on this issue is unacceptable because parents should have the right to choose where their children learn in a democratic society. I agree with this, but I diverge in believing that segregated special education programs do not provide real choice. My view is that if we eliminate the current system of choice for special education, we open up a range of possibilities that actually offer parents more, not less, options for their children.

Frankly, in some school jurisdictions the system of

choice appears to be little more than a mechanism for directing children to segregated special education programs, while still technically meeting the requirements of the Alberta Standards for Special Education. Often this amounts to leaving parents no real option of asking for inclusion. Certainly the neighborhood school is the first point of entry for many students, but fairly quickly thereafter those students who the school does not wish to include are too often directed to special programs. Parents may not be legally required to send their children to such programs, but in many cases pressures applied by administrators to ensure that this happens. I know this because I speak with parents every week throughout the province who have experienced such treatment, and experienced educators in Alberta also know this to be true. In this instance, what real choice is there for parents? In a system in which no segregated programs for children with disabilities existed, parents would have the same range of options available to them as do other parents because all schools would be required to cater to diversity. Therefore, they would have more genuine options. Further, given the previously discussed superiority of inclusion in both academic and social terms, it seems unproductive and possibly unethical to offer parents anything less.

For many educators the current dual system present in many districts where segregation is an option comes as a relief, which might explain why the Alberta Teachers' Association has failed to release any strong statement supporting full inclusion. Inclusion is difficult, and demands levels of support that school staff often find are not there. But this is no reason to not include, because children with diverse learning needs are entitled to the same education as all other children regardless of such pressures. While acknowledging that inclusion is not easy, neither is it impossible, and there are many rewards for those teachers, staff, and administrators who decide to be positive about the approach, and to make it work like thousands of their colleagues have already done both in Alberta and around the world.

There is another reason to discontinue segregated education, and one which, as will be clear, has resonated with the school administrators throughout the world. In the long-term, inclusion costs less (see Halvorsen, Neary, Hunt, & Cesca, 1996; McLaughlin & Warren, 1994; Roahrig, 1993; Salisbury & Chambers, 1994). The costs of special facilities R illuminated, and additional support staff can be shared between classes. Savings are made in not bussing students long distances to their special programs. On a district level, more economies of scale are realized. The money saved can be redeployed into improving conditions for the learning of all students.

Final thoughts

In considering the special education review individuals and organizations such as CASS might wish to reflect on the need to truly support research based practice across Alberta. Ideas which result in the continued or further exclusion of children with diverse learning needs are increasingly reminiscent of a bygone era, especially when the international context is considered. A more productive approach might be to advocate for a policy which supports inclusion in terms of offering strong district leadership, resources, support, and training for this staff and families involved. In this way, true inclusion can be realized throughout Alberta in the same way it already has been in some local school divisions.

Tim Loreman, PhD is an Associate Professor at the University College of Alberta, and is Editor of the International Journal of Whole Schooling, Faculty of Education, Concordia.

Published in The CASS Connection, The College of Alberta School Superintendents, Spring 2009.

References

Bennett, D.B., & Deluca, D. (1997). Putting inclusion into practice: Perspectives of teachers and parents. Exceptional Children, 64(1), 115-132.

Cole, C.M., Waldron, N., & Majd, M. (2004). Academic programs of students across inclusive and traditional settings. Mental Retardation, 42(2), 136-144.

Davis, M.T., Langone, J., & Malone, D.M. (1996). Promoting prosocial behaviours among preschool children with and without disabilities. International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 43(3), 219-246.

Demeris, H., Childs, R.A., & Jordan, A. (2008). The influence of students with special needs included in Grade 3 classrooms on the large-scale achievement scores of students with special needs. Canadian Journal of Education, 30(3), 609-627.

Evans, I. M., Salisbury, C., & Palombaro, M. (1994). Children's perception of fairness in classroom and interpersonal situations involving peers with severe disabilities. Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 19(4), 326-332.

Frederickson, N., Dunsmuir, S., Lang, J., & Monsen, J.J. (2004). Mainstream-special school inclusion partnerships: pupil, parent and teacher perspectives. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 8(1), 37-57.

Halvorsen, A.T., Neary, T., Hunt, P., & Cesca, P. (1996). A cost benefit comparison of inclusive and integrated classes in one California district. In California Peers outreach project: Application and replication of inclusive models at the local level Final report (ERIC Document EC304 691).

Hunt, P., Farron-Davis, F., Beckstead, S., Curtis, D., & Goetz, L. (1994). Evaluating the effects of placement on students with severe disabilities in general education versus special classes. The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 19(3), 200-214.

Kennedy, C. H., & Shukla, S. (1997). Comparing the effects of educational placement on the social relationships of intermediate school students with severe disabilities. Exceptional Children, 64(1), 31-48.

Loreman, T. (2009). Respecting childhood. London: Continuum.

Loreman, T. (2007b). Seven pillars of support for inclusive education: Moving from 'Why?' to 'How?' International Journal of Whole Schooling, 3(2), 22-38.

Loreman, T. (1999). Integration: Coming from the outside. Interaction, 13(1), 21-23.

Loreman, T., Deppeler, J., & Harvey, D. (2005). Inclusive Education: A practical guide to supporting diversity in the classroom. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

McDonnell, J., Thorson, N., McQuivey, C., & Kiefer-O'Donnell, R. (1991). Academic engaged time of students with low-incidence disabilities in general education classes. Mental Retardation, 35(1), 18–26.

McLaughlin, M.J., & Warren, S. H. (1994). The costs of inclusion. School Administrator, 51(10), 8-12.

Roahrig, P. L., (1993). Special Education Inclusion. Fiscal Analysis of Clark County Schools Inclusion Site Grant. Terre Haute, Indiana: Indiana State University Blumberg Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Special Education.

Sailor, W., & Skrtic, T. M. (1995). American education in the postmodern era In L. Paul,

D. Evans, & H. Rosselli (Eds). Integrating school restructuring and special education reform Vol. 1. Orlando: Brace Coll, 214-236.

Salisbury, C., & Chambers, A. (1994). Instructional costs of inclusive schooling. Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 19(3), 215-22.

Sharpe, M. N., York, J. L., & Knight, J. (1994) Effects of inclusion on academic performance of classmates without disabilities: A preliminary study. Remedial and Special Education, 15(5), 281-287.

Sobsey, R. (2005, April). Inclusive education research. Presented at the Whole Schooling Conference 2005, Edmonton, Alberta.

Uditsky, B. (1993). From integration to inclusion: The Canadian experience. In R. Slee (Ed.), Is there a desk with my name on it? The politics of integration (pp. 79-92). USA: Falmer Press.

UNESCO. (1994). The world conference on special needs education: Access and quality.

Final report. Salamanca, Spain: Ministry of Education and Science, Madrid; UNESCO.