



**Implementing the Mandate of Inclusion for
Students With Special Needs:**
A Model for Moving From Concept to Action

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ABOUT THE COVER

The image that has been chosen for the cover is a metaphor for the author's own concept of both integration and inclusion of students with special needs. It has its own story shared here.

The project was a favorite amongst eighth grade visual art students every year. Once a right brain drawing unit was complete and everyone had safely left behind their old way of drawing what they *knew* instead of what they were *seeing*, students were each given a tiny square from a famous painted image. They would have no idea what the finished, collaborated image would be until the unveiling, but they understood the importance of enlarging their piece with extreme accuracy of shape, proportion, colour, tone, texture... they were a community of artists excited by a newfound skill set and highly motivated by this sudden interdependence.

Over the years, each class would complete the assignment, mount it, and then leave it displayed on the art room wall until graduation five full years later. Daily, without fail, students would bring their friends to the art room to proudly show them their square, and to explain how important each and every piece was. Students, who had long since abandoned art for other things, would show up two and three years later to stand and study this patchwork configuration that they had been a part of back in grade eight.

When William wheeled in under power, I had already considered that not only could he not manage physically holding a pastel, but also his tendency to be tactile defensive would be an issue. William communicated with a complex augmentative communication system called *Pathfinder*, operating the technology with a head mouse. The head mouse was a tiny, silver, confetti sized dot adhered to his forehead. After some thoughtful consideration, *Adobe Photoshop* was loaded onto his laptop computer and William was introduced to drawing with the filter option set on 'rough pastel'.

When the day arrived for the assembly of the squares on their chosen installation wall, William's number 27 went up on the wall like everyone else's except that instead of pastel on construction paper, his medium was printer ink on computer paper. It was unremarkable in the context of the flow of the Canadian *Group of Seven* landscape that these thirty-five students had constructed. That it did not stand out, however, was in another sense, *remarkable*. Like his square, William did not stand out.

As the finished piece hung on the wall for the remainder of the year, visitors often poured over the squares in search of the one that 'the boy in the wheel chair' had done. Some stood with their nose nearly touching the wall to find the computer generated square; some actually touched the wrong one two or three times, frustrated by the pastel smudge now on their fingertip. Often the pastel-free panel had to be pointed out to them.

On the very last day of class, and my last day as a teacher at the school, we shared our reflections and experiences of the past semester as a group. I shared with the class, and with William, how their pastel landscape had become for me, a metaphor for inclusion; that the first thing a person should notice coming into a class is that – the class. Inclusion means that a person with a disability is so much a part of the class that one has to look hard to find them. The class had been an example of that, and their group project, a powerful visual metaphor. In keeping with the group's generous spirit and appreciation of the experience we had shared, they asked to take it down so that I could take it with me.

The original 5 foot by 4 foot pastel painting still hangs on the wall in the author's office at the District Special Education office. It serves as a daily reminder of what is important. It has sparked many conversations with visitors to my office, who might not have otherwise thought of inclusion and the experiences of students with special needs, in quite this way. It seemed fitting that it should be the cover for this dissertation.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on creating the conditions for social change, proposing that through the alignment of organizational values and practice, organizations stuck at a concept stage may begin to move toward positive action. It is based on evidence gathered from one British Columbia school district, as it struggles with implementation of a provincial Ministry of Education mandate for the inclusion of students with special needs in BC schools.

Chapter One is an introduction to the culture within which the examination of values and practice is observed and considered, in the broad sense of the prevailing Canadian and provincial culture, as well as within the district and its individual school communities. Chapter Two provides a review of the current literature on social change within organizations, and the issues related to inclusion and the model of Full Inclusion. Chapter Three presents the dissertation framework, with a description of the methodology, techniques and procedures used in the investigative research. Chapter Four provides a description of the data that was collected. Chapter Five identifies and expands on trends indicated in the data through analysis and interpretation, as well as through presentation of narratives which further give understanding to inclusive (and non-inclusive) experiences. This chapter also discusses those areas of incongruency between values and practice that have held inclusion at the concept stage, or continue to do so. Chapter Six, summary and conclusions, reviews the alignment initiatives so far completed, presently underway, and still needed to move inclusion from concept to reality as a norm in British Columbia classrooms. This final chapter also provides the reader with recommendations for future research.

Overall, this dissertation suggests that social change requires careful consideration of both organizational values and practice to create optimal alignment between them. As an example, the concept of Inclusion of students with special needs has so far lacked the necessary inertia to become common practice. The placement of students with special needs in regular classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers has achieved proximity, but not the inclusion that is a core ideal of the theory of Full Inclusion. The model for creating the conditions for social change proposed here allows us to see why the concept of Inclusion has not become operationalized, and then to propose the necessary adjustments. As alignment improves and the organization is transformed, individuals are able to carry the concept forward and begin to give shape to action.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

accreditation a process whereby BC schools received government approval and certification that they are meeting the provincial standard.

accountability contract the school accreditation process was replaced with a system whereby individual school districts in BC would submit school planning documentation as evidence of accountability to the Ministry of Education.

adaptation an instructional or assessment strategy facilitating a student's successful completion of a prescribed learning outcome.

aids paraprofessional workers or assistants trained to support students with disabilities at school.

best practice (also **good practice**) a technique, method, process, or activity which is considered to be the benchmark of excellent teaching practice.

elementary school the pre-high school grades, kindergarten (pre-grade one) through to grade seven.

Discreet Trial a data-driven method of 1:1 instruction used to teach functional academic skills to autistic and other students with special needs.

District the province of British Columbia is organized into administrative divisions accountable to the Ministry of Education, but responsible for schools in their local region.

dual entry a BC government initiative which allowed young children to choose from two start dates each year for kindergarten, meaning that progression through the later grades was staggered. The program was dropped soon after it was implemented.

Full Inclusion (also **Inclusion**) a Special Education model of service delivery in which mentally and physically challenged children are placed in regular school classrooms instead of separate classrooms.

Full Participation describes a placement scenario where the student is able to fully participate in the activities required for completion of the prescribed learning outcomes for a grade level or course without modification.

inclusionary practice (also **inclusive practice**) classroom practice which, in a classroom structured according to the Special Education model of Full Inclusion, fully addresses the Educational, physical, and social learning needs of a student with special needs in an atmosphere which is accepting, welcoming, and which fosters a sense of belonging in all students.

high school in British Columbia, school for students from grade 8 until grade 12. Students may remain in high school up until age 19.

hoya a mechanical or hydraulic lift to assist attendants with the moving of individuals in wheelchairs.

inclusion where proximity and participation is such that students feel a sense of belonging through an experience of being welcome and accepted by peers and staff.

Individual Education Plan a written plan which describes long term goals, short term learning objectives, and instructional strategies for students with special needs.

integration a term first used in the 70's and 80's to describe the movement of students which special needs from segregated settings into classrooms in the mainstream. Placement emphasizes physical proximity, rather than the quality of participation.

Likert Scale a type of psychometric response scale often used in questionnaires and surveys in which respondents indicate their level of agreement to a statement.

mainstreaming a term used in the 70's and 80's to describe the movement of students which special needs from segregated settings into classrooms in the mainstream (regular school environment) when they could meet prescribed learning outcomes, or when the expectations of the regular classroom were not relevant.

mildly mentally handicapped a person assessed as borderline mentally handicapped, possibly effecting their physical, cognitive, language, and social development.

mentally handicapped any person with an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) below 70.

Ministry of Education the department within the provincial government which oversees all aspects of Education, including setting policy and providing funding to individual school districts.

modifications changes made to prescribed learning outcomes for students with IEPs for whom the regular curriculum is not attainable.

non-cognitively impaired students with disabilities, who are not mentally handicapped. Ministry categories include: Sensory Disabilities (Categories E, F), Learning Disabilities (Category Q), Behaviour Disabilities (Categories H, R), Gifted (Category P)

non-inclusionary practice any teacher practice which excludes students on the basis of their disability.

Paraprofessional also called a special education assistant (SEA), teaching assistant (TA), or aid, they are trained to support students with disabilities at school. They are not certified teachers, and are trained primarily to support behaviour, communication, and medical or care needs of students with disabilities, under the direction of a teacher and administrator.

parent-teacher interviews several afternoons each school year, parents are invited to scheduled private meetings with teachers to discuss their son or daughter's progress at school.

PB + 15 a pay category in some B.C. school districts which recognizes course work beyond the basic certification requirement of a teacher, but that is not equivalent to a Masters Degree.

physically handicapped also, physical disabilities. A range of nervous system impairments, chronic health, or musculoskeletal conditions impacting motor ability or physical movement.

PLO Prescribed Learning Outcome all courses and grade level curricula have a set of prescribed learning outcomes as the guide for teachers to follow.

resource room a supplemental program provided by schools to assist students, identified as having special learning needs, due to which they are not expected to achieve a *British Columbia Certificate of Graduation*, but instead work towards completion of the outcomes as specified in the student's Individual Education Plan.

school communities the students, parents, teachers, staff, and surrounding neighbourhood of a single school, elementary or secondary, forms the school community.

school district the province of British Columbia is organized into 59 regions called school districts. Each district has its own school board. All districts operate according to the guidelines and funding of the provincial Ministry of Education, in accordance with the BC School Act.

segregation the Education of students with disabilities in a setting that is separate from same aged, non-disabled peers.

sensory disability an impairment related to vision or hearing.

severely / profoundly mentally handicapped students who are of the lowest intellectual level of functioning; IQ not measurable.

SIP School Improvement Plan; every BC school must have a documented school improvement plan, which is submitted to the district.

Social Stories® a tool for teaching social skills to children with Autism and related disabilities. Social Stories provide an individual with accurate information about those situations that he may find difficult or confusing.

Special Education the educational department that is specialized in the delivery of services to people with special needs due to all types of disabilities.

special needs categories established to determine educational need and funding. See Appendix F for a list of the current Ministry categories for special needs.

student teacher pre-service teachers, or student teachers, are in training to become teachers, and must complete course work and practicums before provincial certification is granted.

students with special needs students with special needs have disabilities of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional, or behavioural nature, or have a learning disability or have exceptional gifts or talents. (BC School Act) In 2005-06, schools in British Columbia reported 61,277 students with Special Educational needs. The proportion of students with special needs in the total BC public schools student population in Kindergarten through Grade 12 is about 10.2 percent.

PROLOGUE

My career as an educator has had two tracks. A talent in the visual arts translated easily into the role of teacher. And training at a time when teaching jobs were scarce suggested training in Special Education as a strategy for “getting a foot in the door.” Ironically, it was the afterthought of working with students with severe intellectual and physical disabilities that became my ultimate teaching and intellectual challenge. I eased into a two-hat career as a secondary school teacher, some years a visual and media art instructor, and others, a Special Education resource room teacher. No matter my assignment, my strong visual sensibility and creativity shaped my ability to meet the needs of challenged learners in the resource room, and my comfort and proficiency to incorporate effective instructional strategies made my regular classroom a learning environment where all kinds of students could feel included and be successful. This cross-pollination of skills and knowledge became a professional way of life, with the fullest rewards coming from the regular classroom, teaching visual and media art, and including students with physical and intellectual disabilities into the regular classroom environment. Their participation was always meaningful and their sense of belonging legitimate.

An overlap between my two areas of expertise in teaching was the design and implementation of systems. I enjoyed building systems that could make sense and order of the challenging logistics of many students, confined space, and limited resources. I was intrigued by organizational theory and pursued graduate work in the area of educational policy and management, as well as educational reform.

When an opportunity to be part of opening a newly built school presented itself, I took it. The process of establishing a new school community was challenging and exciting. And so, when the opportunity presented itself a second time with the next new school, I took that too. It was in the second newly completed staffroom that a brief conversation with a colleague would profoundly impact my views of education and my priorities as an educator. I was meeting many of the new staff for the first time when a novice science teacher introduced herself and asked me what subject I taught. I explained

that I was the Resource Room teacher, referring to a program for students with physical and intellectual disabilities ranging from mild to severe and profound.

“Don’t worry,” the young teacher replied to me as she physically consoled me with a pat on my shoulder. “I am sure *a real job* will come up eventually.”

Before she returned to the multi-million dollar Science Super Lab which was still taking tours from other envious districts’ higher-ups, I had neither the time, nor the proclivity to offer a rebut. My students would be arriving the next morning and the handicapped washroom facility located down the hall from the Resource Room was too small for a wheelchair to turn around in. A lifted assist from a wheelchair would be impossible given that the commode had been placed against the wall, leaving nowhere for an attendant to stand. Worse, for students not able to use a toilet the facility was without a hoist lift mounted in the ceiling or a change table. Three of the students in the program would arrive, dependent handicapped young adults, in need of basic handicapped washroom facilities. The plans had been drafted, but not followed. At the moment there were more important problems to solve than educating the young science teacher. And while her comment did not offer any *new* insight about the status or priority of Special Education, it became the catalyst for much of my own thought, soul searching, and internal dialogue over the following five years that I would spend with these students and their many special challenges.

Elsewhere in my life, I had stumbled onto the writings of Dr. Maria Nemeth, discovering how to bring our own qualities of being forward, “that ineffable, indescribable part of us that remains constant and courageous, regardless of what is happening around us...those strengths and virtue...refining – or redefining – our purpose in life” (Nemeth, 2003, p. 2). Through systematic alignment of personal standards with a consciousness around the decisions and choices made in daily life, I began to unleash the tremendous power to bring goals and dreams into physical reality. I discovered that the ebb and flow of achieving a purpose or expanding a vision existed in relation to staying on my own path.

While many shifts and successes were manifesting themselves in my life, I was discerning a deepening distrust and unhappiness in those with whom I shared my work life. Conversations revealed a pervading sense of feeling overwhelmed, not just on my

school staff, but on others' as well. Teachers were physically tired from the day-to-day demands of teaching on top of a growing list of administrative and clerical responsibilities and emotionally exhausted from feeling undervalued and unappreciated. And then one day I did not notice the negativity any more. It had become the school culture and this was now what *normal* was.

Two things however, remained evident. The low regard for the Special Education programs and the students in them was pervasive. And now, as a regular teacher who had many students with special needs integrated into my classroom, I was feeling burned-out by the very thing I stood for.

The perception that Special Education programs were little more than expensive babysitting for students with disabilities was setting a low bar for integration as well. The dance teacher allowed a pair of students with special needs in her class, but they were not allowed to have a role in the stage performance. The soon-to-retire drama teacher physically separated his integrated student from the rest of class since he was apparently unable to draw the clown faces that had been assigned.

With a Special Education background, I was not a typical classroom teacher. I took pride that in my classes the participation of students with disabilities was meaningful. With my Special Education hat on, I had an extensive set of skills, knowledge and experience that made certain that their experience was positive, their sense of belonging was full, their individualized goals were strategically connected to the Ministry prescribed learning outcomes for the rest of the class, and their behaviour support plans were implemented.

As I changed hats from Special Education to regular classroom teacher, my perspective changed as well. My own doubts were creeping in as I questioned my ability to maintain the standard that was good practice for students with special needs in the regular classroom. Furthermore, how could we expect this from teachers with *no* Special Educational background – no skills, no knowledge, no training? And yet, how could we expect anything less?

In the same Spring that my application for this PhD program was approved,

I received notice from my school district that I had been successful in my bid for a position as a district Special Education consultant, commencing in the Fall of 2005. While I would be working closely in a consulting role with teachers in each of the district's twenty secondary schools, I would be leaving behind my classroom teacher identity. I packed up my still-life collection of animal skulls and artifacts and donated it to a young visual arts teacher about to start her own career. I taped up boxes of files collected over dozens of semesters, ready for storage. I would be leaving lesson planning, report cards and parent-teacher interviews behind, but taking with me a wealth of invaluable experience and the accumulation of 17 years of professional growth as a fulltime secondary teacher. The perspective I had planned to bring to my research on the students that had become so significant in shaping my values and actions as an educator changed overnight. In my new role, I found myself with a significantly broader vantage point in the form of daily, unrestricted access to every Special Education program in the district and the individuals who influence them at both school-based and district levels.

The combination of years of hands-on experience in the classroom together with this unique and ongoing level of access to the wider landscape of education for students with disabilities fueled my belief that this research was both important and necessary. Now, it is with optimism that I look out over the educational landscape, noting the strengths of our resources and the potential of our students. But it is with an equal amount of trepidation that I wonder if I have been able to climb high enough to see far enough in the distance, to know what is coming. The projected numbers suggest a wave of students with special needs on the horizon, heading our way. We will either be prepared for their arrival or it will hit us like a talked-about, but unheeded tsunami. Essentially, I believe that if we are unable *or unwilling* to listen to what teachers are telling us, and to rethink and reconstruct some current notions about how we address the learning needs of students with physical and intellectual disabilities the losses will be great.

Based on my career as both a Special Education professional and a regular classroom teacher, the spirit and intent of this dissertation is rooted in a belief that as a school system we can do much better for our students with disabilities. It requires re-pouring a foundation of *common* values – not *some people's* values – and recognizing that the same diversity we are asking to be respected in the classroom is reflected in the

values and beliefs of the professionals who *are* the school system. This research is born of a sincere desire to advocate for the educational needs of students with disabilities and committed to evolving towards a concept of Special Education that will be positive action in the hands of teachers. Some systems and structures will need to be torn down. Those that are re-established must align with those beliefs and the values that are shared.